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THE RETURN OF BLACK MASK

ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JANUARY 2008

Shot Through With Suspense

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Dashiell Hammett

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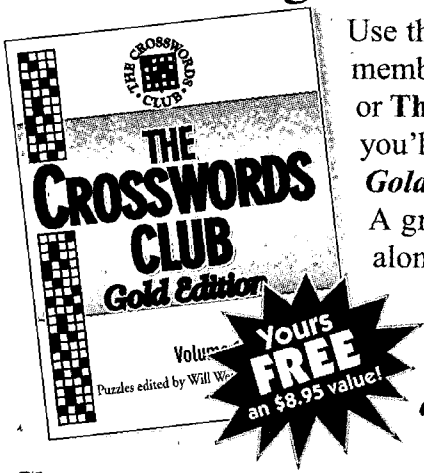

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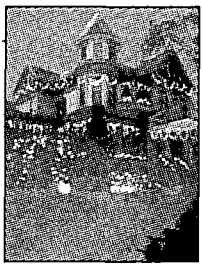

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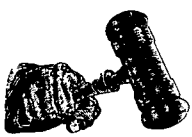

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Black Mask

by Keith Alan Deutsch

As publisher and conservator of *Black Mask Magazine,* it is a great pleasure for me to help return the publication, after more than a thirty-year absence, to the pages of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.*

Black Mask (1920–1951) introduced the American hardboiled detective to our popular culture in the early 1920s and has influenced magazines and books, radio, movies, television, and every new form of popular entertainment up to this day.

Perhaps even more importantly, particularly in the writing of Dashiell Hammett and later Raymond Chandler, *Black Mask Magazine* helped change the way American fiction (and literature) was written and paced. Although Hemingway is routinely congratulated for the invention of the terse, "modern" declarative sentence, Gertrude Stein (Hemingway's mentor) made it clear in her book *Narration* that it was Dashiell Hammett, in his *Black Mask* work, who originated the modern narrative style. As to pace, as Raymond Chandler often explained, in the *Black Mask* story, incident and action piled on action were more important than a clear linear plot. A *Black Mask* tale was hard-hitting and left the reader breathless.

Black Mask Magazine is also famous, of course, for taking mystery stories out of the parlors of polite society and into the dark underworld of the ever-evolving mean streets of the modern metropolis.

Fred Dannay, an original member of the writing team called Ellery Queen, and the founding editor of *EQMM,* appreciated as much as anyone the importance of *Black Mask* to the history of the detective story. During the 1940s and 1950s when Dashiell Hammett was out of favor because of his political views, Mr. Dannay helped keep Hammett's *Black Mask* stories in print in a celebrated series of Dell paperbacks, which he edited and promoted.

After 1951, when *Black Mask Magazine* stopped publishing in America, Mr. Dannay acquired the title and kept *Black Mask* alive in the pages of *EQMM,* introducing the Black Mask Department, which featured a story from *Black Mask* (or a tale in the *Black Mask* style) in almost every issue of *EQMM.*

In 1973, when I was acquiring all the rights to *Black Mask* (which by that time had been scattered among many different companies), Mr. Dannay was kind enough to pass the *Black Mask* name and legacy over to me, and the Black Mask Department in *EQMM* came to an end. And so I end this brief introduction where I began, by stating again my pleasure in helping to bring *Black Mask* back to the pages of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.* ●

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EQMM and Black Mask

What can readers expect from *EQMM*'s newly restored department Black Mask? Selections will include reprints from the original magazine, rediscovered with the assistance of conservator Keith Alan Deutsch, and new stories commissioned and chosen by *EQMM*'s own editors. Since virtually all of contemporary "hardboiled" and "noir" fiction has qualities that can be traced back to the great early contributors to *Black Mask,* we will consider the full range of the current field to be our domain, with emphasis (when we can find them) on fast-paced stories full of action.

The most important of all the early contributors to *Black Mask* was Dashiell Hammett, whose stories about his "Continental Op," during the magazine's first decade, brought him immediate fame. We begin our series with a reprint of one of the most intriguing of the Continental Op stories, "Bodies Piled Up," a twisty mix of action yarn, gangster tale, and detective puzzle. Though many of his stories (like "Bodies Piled Up") fall squarely within genre fiction, Hammett's authentic characterizations and his uncompromising depictions of American society earned him a place in mainstream literature as well. His work has become the standard beside which the work of crime writers at the so-called "literary" end of the spectrum is judged. In 1992, the International Association of Crime Writers established an award in Hammett's name "for literary excellence in the field of crime writing." For this first Black Mask issue we have paired our Hammett reprint with a new story by the 2005 winner of that award, Chuck Hogan. Mr. Hogan's "Two Thousand Volts" is a classic example of the "noir" story: a tale about characters who cannot put things right without crossing a dangerous moral boundary, and in which justice, once considered essential to the conclusion of a mystery, has become something admitting shades of gray.

Just as the original *Black Mask Magazine* was hard-hitting, readers of our new series should expect the tales contained under this banner to be edgy, and sometimes more violent and harsher in language than other *EQMM* stories. We hope you'll find this expansion of our range of fiction an enhancement to the magazine. We'll be featuring the department every other month, and we've got some treats in store, including several never before published stories by another past master of hardboiled fiction, Mickey Spillane. Stay tuned! ●

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BLACK MASK

BODIES PILED UP

by Dashiell Hammett

The Montgomery Hotel's regular detective had taken his last week's rake-off from the hotel bootlegger in merchandise instead of cash, had drunk it down, had fallen asleep in the lobby, and had been fired. I happened to be the only idle operative in the Continental Detective Agency's San Francisco branch at the time, and thus it came about that I had three days of hotel-coppering while a man was being found to take the job permanently.

The Montgomery is a quiet hotel of the better sort, and so I had a very restful time of it—until the third and last day. Then things changed.

Among the many good collections of the work of Dashiell Hammett is the recently published *The Dain Curse, The Glass Key, and Selected Stories* (Everyman's Library, September 2007) with an introduction by James Ellroy. Also well worth a look is the 2005 collection *Lost Stories* (Vince Emery Productions), introduced by Joe Gores, which includes some stories never before reprinted in book form. ✝

I came down into the lobby that afternoon to find Stacey, the assistant manager, hunting for me.

"One of the maids just phoned that there's something wrong up in 906," he said.

We went up to that room together. The door was open. In the center of the floor stood a maid, staring goggle-eyed at the closed door of the clothespress. From under it, extending perhaps a foot across the floor toward us, was a snake-shaped ribbon of blood.

I stepped past the maid and tried the door. It was unlocked. I opened it. Slowly, rigidly, a man pitched out into my arms—pitched out backward—and there was a six-inch slit down the back of his coat, and the coat was wet and sticky.

That wasn't altogether a surprise: The blood on the floor had pre-

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pared me for something of the sort. But when another followed him—facing me, this one, with a dark, distorted face—I dropped the one I had caught and jumped back.

And as I jumped a third man came tumbling out after the others.

From behind me came a scream and a thud as the maid fainted. I wasn't feeling any too steady myself. I'm no sensitive plant, and I've looked at a lot of unlovely sights in my time, but for weeks afterward I could see those three dead men coming out of that clothespress to pile up at my feet: coming out slowly—almost deliberately—in a ghastly game of "follow your leader."

Seeing them, you couldn't doubt that they were really dead. Every detail of their falling, every detail of the heap in which they now lay, had a horrible certainty of lifelessness in it.

I turned to Stacey, who, deathly white himself, was keeping on his feet only by clinging to the foot of the brass bed.

"Get the woman out! Get doctors—police!"

I pulled the three dead bodies apart, laying them out in a grim row, faces up. Then I made a hasty examination of the room.

A soft hat, which fitted one of the dead men, lay in the center of the unruffled bed. The room key was in the door, on the inside. There was no blood in the room except what had leaked out of the clothespress, and the room showed no signs of having been the scene of a struggle.

The door to the bathroom was open. In the bottom of the bathtub was a shattered gin bottle, which, from the strength of the odor and the dampness of the tub, had been nearly full when broken. In one corner of the bathroom I found a small whiskey glass, and another under the tub. Both were dry, clean, and odorless.

The inside of the clothespress door was stained with blood from the height of my shoulder to the floor, and two hats lay in the puddle of blood on the closet floor. Each of the hats fitted one of the dead men.

That was all. Three dead men, a broken gin bottle, blood.

Stacey returned with a doctor, and while the doctor was examining the dead men, the police detectives arrived.

The doctor's work was soon done.

"This man," he said, pointing to one of them, "was struck on the back of the head with a small blunt instrument, and then strangled. This one"—pointing to another—"was simply strangled. And the third was stabbed in the back with a blade perhaps five inches long. They have been dead for about two hours—since noon or a little after."

The assistant manager identified two of the bodies. The man who

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had been stabbed—the first to fall out of the clothespress—had arrived at the hotel three days before, registering as Tudor Ingraham of Washington, D.C., and had occupied room 915, three doors away.

The last man to fall out—the one who had been simply choked—was the occupant of the room. His name was Vincent Develyn. He was an insurance broker and had made the hotel his home since his wife's death, some four years before.

The third man had been seen in Develyn's company frequently, and one of the clerks remembered that they had come into the hotel together at about five minutes after twelve this day. Cards and letters in his pockets told us that he was Homer Ansley, a member of the law firm of Lankershim and Ansley, whose offices were in the Miles Building—next-door to Develyn's office.

Develyn's pockets held between $150 and $200; Ansley's wallet contained more than $100; Ingraham's pockets yielded nearly $300, and in a money-belt around his waist we found $2,200 and two medium-sized unset diamonds. All three had watches—Develyn's was a valuable one—in their pockets, and Ingraham wore two rings, both of which were expensive ones. Ingraham's room key was in his pocket.

Beyond this money—whose presence would seem to indicate that robbery hadn't been the motive behind the three killings—we found nothing on any of the persons to throw the slightest light on the crime. Nor did the most thorough examination of both Ingraham's and Develyn's rooms teach us anything.

In Ingraham's room we found a dozen or more packs of carefully marked cards, some crooked dice, and an immense amount of data on racehorses. Also we found that he had a wife who lived on East Delavan Avenue in Buffalo, and a brother on Crutcher Street in Dallas; as well as a list of names and addresses that we carried off to investigate later. But nothing in either room pointed, even indirectly, at murder.

Phels, the Police Department Bertillion man, found a number of fingerprints in Develyn's room, but we couldn't tell whether they would be of any value or not until he had worked them up. Though Develyn and Ansley had apparently been strangled by hands, Phels was unable to get prints from either their necks or their collars.

The maid who had discovered the blood said that she had straightened up Develyn's room between ten and eleven that morning, but had not put fresh towels in the bathroom. It was for this purpose that she had gone to the room in the afternoon. She had gone there earlier—between 10:20 and 10:45—for that purpose, but Ingraham had not then left.

The elevator man who had carried Ansley and Develyn up from the lobby at a few minutes after twelve remembered that they had been laughingly discussing their golf scores of the previous day

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during the ride. No one had seen anything suspicious in the hotel around the time at which the doctor had placed the murders. But that was to be expected.

The murderer could have left the room, closing the door behind him, and walked away secure in the knowledge that at noon a man in the corridors of the Montgomery would attract little attention. If he was staying at the hotel he would simply have gone to his room; if not, he would have either walked all the way down to the street, or down a floor or two and then caught an elevator.

None of the hotel employees had ever seen Ingraham and Develyn together. There was nothing to show that they had even the slightest acquaintance. Ingraham habitually stayed in his room until noon, and did not return to it until late at night. Nothing was known of his affairs.

At the Miles Building we—that is, Marty O'Hara and George Dean of the Police Department Homicide Detail, and I—questioned Ansley's partner and Develyn's employees. Both Develyn and Ansley, it seemed, were ordinary men who led ordinary lives: lives that held neither dark spots nor queer kinks. Ansley was married and had two children; he lived on Lake Street. Both men had a sprinkling of relatives and friends scattered here and there through the country; and, so far as we could learn, their affairs were in perfect order.

They had left their offices this day to go to luncheon together, intending to visit Develyn's room first for a drink apiece from a bottle of gin someone coming from Australia had smuggled in to him.

"Well," O'Hara said when we were on the street again, "this much is clear. If they went up to Develyn's room for a drink, it's a cinch that they were killed almost as soon as they got in the room. Those whiskey glasses you found were dry and clean. Whoever turned the trick must have been waiting for them. I wonder about this fellow Ingraham."

"I'm wondering, too," I said. "Figuring it out from the positions I found them in when I opened the closet door, Ingraham sizes up as the key to the whole thing. Develyn was back against the wall, with Ansley in front of him, both facing the door. Ingraham was facing them, with his back to the door. The clothespress was just large enough for them to be packed in it—too small for them to slip down while the door was closed.

"Then there was no blood in the room except what had come from the clothespress. Ingraham, with that gaping slit in his back, couldn't have been stabbed until he was inside the closet, or he'd have bled elsewhere. He was standing close to the other men when he was knifed, and whoever knifed him closed the door quickly afterward.

"Now, why should he have been standing in such a position? Do you dope it out that he and another killed the two friends, and that while he was stowing their bodies in the closet his accomplice

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finished him off?"

"Maybe," Dean said.

And that "maybe" was still as far as we had gone three days later.

We had sent and received bales of telegrams, having relatives and acquaintances of the dead men interviewed; and we had found nothing that seemed to have any bearing upon their deaths. Nor had we found the slightest connecting link between Ingraham and the other two. We had traced those other two back step by step almost to their cradles. We had accounted for every minute of their time since Ingraham had arrived in San Francisco—thoroughly enough to convince us that neither of them had met Ingraham.

Ingraham, we had learned, was a bookmaker and all-around crooked gambler. His wife and he had separated, but were on good terms. Some fifteen years before, he had been convicted of "assault with intent to kill" in Newark, N.J., and had served two years in the state prison. But the man he had assaulted had died of pneumonia in Omaha in 1914.

Ingraham had come to San Francisco for the purpose of opening a gambling club, and all our investigations had tended to show that his activities while in the city had been toward that end alone.

The fingerprints Phels had secured had all turned out to belong to Stacey, the maid, the police detectives, or myself. In short, we had found nothing!

So much for our attempts to learn the motive behind the three murders.

We now dropped that angle and settled down to the detail-studying, patience-taxing grind of picking up the murderer's trail. From any crime to its author there is a trail. It may be—as in this case—obscure; but, since matter cannot move without disturbing other matter along its path, there always is—there must be—a trail of some sort. And finding and following such trails is what a detective is paid to do.

In the case of a murder, it is possible sometimes to take a short-cut to the end of the trail by first finding the motive. A knowledge of the motive often reduces the field of possibilities; sometimes points directly to the guilty one.

So far, all we knew about the motive in the particular case we were dealing with was that it hadn't been robbery; unless something we didn't know about had been stolen—something of sufficient value to make the murderer scorn the money in his victims' pockets.

We hadn't altogether neglected the search for the murderer's trail, of course, but—being human—we had devoted most of our attention to trying to find a short-cut. Now we set out to find our man, or men, regardless of what had urged him or them to commit the crimes.

Of the people who had been registered at the hotel on the day of the killing there were nine men of whose innocence we hadn't

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found a reasonable amount of proof. Four of these were still at the hotel, and only one of that four interested us very strongly. That one—a big raw-boned man of forty-five or fifty, who had registered as J.J. Cooper of Anaconda, Montana—wasn't, we had definitely established, really a mining man, as he pretended to be. And our telegraphic communications with Anaconda failed to show that he was known there. Therefore we were having him shadowed—with few results.

Five men of the nine had departed since the murders; three of them leaving forwarding addresses with the mail clerk. Gilbert Jacquemart had occupied room 946 and had ordered his mail forwarded to him at a Los Angeles hotel. W.F. Salway, who had occupied room 1022, had given instructions that his mail be readdressed to a number on Clark Street in Chicago. Ross Orrett, room 609, had asked to have his mail sent to him care of General Delivery at the local post office.

Jacquemart had arrived at the hotel two days before, and had left on the afternoon of the murders. Salway had arrived the day before the murders and had left the day after them. Orrett had arrived the day of the murders and had left the following day.

Sending telegrams to have the first two found and investigated, I went after Orrett myself. A musical comedy named *"What For?"* was being widely advertised just then with gaily printed plum-colored handbills. I got one of them and, at a stationery store, an envelope to match, and mailed it to Orrett at the Montgomery Hotel. There are concerns that make a practice of securing the names of arrivals at the principal hotels and mailing them advertisements. I trusted that Orrett, knowing this, wouldn't be suspicious when my gaudy envelope, forwarded from the hotel, reached him through the General Delivery window.

Dick Foley—the Agency's shadow specialist—planted himself in the post office, to loiter around with an eye on the "O" window until he saw my plum-colored envelope passed out, and then to shadow the receiver.

I spent the next day trying to solve the mysterious J.J. Cooper's game, but he was still a puzzle when I knocked off that night.

At a little before five the following morning Dick Foley dropped into my room on his way home to wake me up and tell me what he had done.

"This Orrett baby is our meat!" he said. "Picked him up when he got his mail yesterday afternoon. Got another letter besides yours. Got an apartment on Van Ness Avenue. Took it the day after the killing, under the name of B.T. Quinn. Packing a gun under his left arm—there's that sort of a bulge there. Just went home to bed. Been visiting all the dives in North Beach. Who do you think he's hunting for?"

"Who?"

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"Guy Cudner."

That was news! This Guy Cudner, alias "The Darkman," was the most dangerous bird on the Coast, if not in the country. He had only been nailed once, but if he had been convicted of all the crimes that everybody knew he had committed he'd have needed half a dozen lives to crowd his sentences into, besides another half-dozen to carry to the gallows. However, he had decidedly the right sort of backing—enough to buy him everything he needed in the way of witnesses, alibis, even juries and an occasional judge.

I don't know what went wrong with his support that one time he was convicted up North and sent over for a one-to-fourteen-year hitch, but it adjusted itself promptly, for the ink was hardly dry on the press notices of his conviction before he was loose again on parole.

"Is Cudner in town?"

"Don't know," Dick said, "but this Orrett, or Quinn, or whatever his name is, is surely hunting for him. In Rick's place, at 'Wop' Healey's, and at Pigatti's. 'Porky' Grout tipped me off. Says Orrett doesn't know Cudner by sight, but is trying to find him. Porky didn't know what he wants with him."

This Porky Grout was a dirty little rat who would sell out his family—if he ever had one—for the price of a flop. But with these lads who play both sides of the game it's always a question of which side they're playing when you think they're playing yours.

"Think Porky was coming clean?" I asked.

"Chances are—but you can't gamble on him."

"Is Orrett acquainted here?"

"Doesn't seem to be. Knows where he wants to go but has to ask how to get there. Hasn't spoken to anybody that seemed to know him."

"What's he like?"

"Not the kind of egg you'd want to tangle with offhand, if you ask me. He and Cudner would make a good pair. They don't look alike. This egg is tall and slim, but he's built right—those fast, smooth muscles. Face is sharp without being thin, if you get me. I mean all the lines in it are straight. No curves. Chin, nose, mouth, eyes—all straight, sharp lines and angles. Looks like the kind of egg we know Cudner is. Make a good pair. Dresses well and doesn't look like a rowdy—but harder than hell! A big-game hunter! Our meat, I bet you!"

"It doesn't look bad," I agreed. "He came to the hotel the morning of the day the men were killed, and checked out the next morning. He packs a rod, and changed his name after he left. And now he's paired off with The Darkman. It doesn't look bad at all!"

"I'm telling you," Dick said, "this fellow looks like three killings wouldn't disturb his rest any. I wonder where Cudner fits in."

"I can't guess. But if he and Orrett haven't connected yet, then

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Cudner wasn't in on the murders; but he may give us the answer."

Then I jumped out of bed. "I'm going to gamble on Porky's dope being on the level! How would you describe Cudner?"

"You know him better than I do."

"Yes, but how would you describe him to me if I didn't know him?"

"A little fat guy with a red forked scar on his left cheek. What's the idea?"

"It's a good one," I admitted. "That scar makes all the difference in the world. If he didn't have it and you were to describe him you'd go into all the details of his appearance. But he has it, so you simply say, 'A little fat guy with a red forked scar on his left cheek.' It's a ten to one that that's just how he has been described to Orrett. I don't look like Cudner, but I'm his size and build, and with a scar on my face Orrett will fall for me."

"What then?"

"There's no telling; but I ought to be able to learn a lot if I can get Orrett talking to me as Cudner. It's worth a try anyway."

"You can't get away with it—not in San Francisco. Cudner is too well known."

"What difference does that make, Dick? Orrett is the only one I want to fool. If he takes me for Cudner, well and good. If he doesn't, still well and good. I won't force myself on him."

"How are you going to fake the scar?"

"Easy! We have pictures of Cudner, showing the scar, in the criminal gallery. I'll get some collodion—it's sold in drugstores under several trade names for putting on cuts and scratches—color it, and imitate Cudner's scar on my cheek. It dries with a shiny surface and, put on thick, will stand out enough to look like an old scar."

It was a little after eleven the following night when Dick telephoned me that Orrett was in Pigatti's place, on Pacific Street, and apparently settled there for some little while. My scar already painted on, I jumped into a taxi and within a few minutes was talking to Dick, around the corner from Pigatti's.

"He's sitting at the last table back on the left side. And he was alone when I came out. You can't miss him. He's the only egg in the joint with a clean collar."

"You better stick outside—half a block or so away—with the taxi," I told Dick. "Maybe brother Orrett and I will leave together and I'd just as leave have you standing by in case things break wrong."

Pigatti's place is a long, narrow, low-ceilinged cellar, always dim with smoke. Down the middle runs a narrow strip of bare floor for dancing. The rest of the floor is covered with closely packed tables, whose cloths are always soiled.

Most of the tables were occupied when I came in, and half a

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dozen couples were dancing. Few of the faces to be seen were strangers to the morning "line-up" at police headquarters.

Peering through the smoke, I saw Orrett at once, seated alone in a far corner, looking at the dancers with the set blank face of one who masks an all-seeing watchfulness. I walked down the other side of the room and crossed the strip of dance floor directly under a light, so that the scar might be clearly visible to him. Then I selected a vacant table not far from his, and sat down facing him.

Ten minutes passed while he pretended an interest in the dancers and I affected a thoughtful stare at the dirty cloth on my table; but neither of us missed so much as a flicker of the other's lids.

His eyes—gray eyes that were pale without being shallow, with black needle-point pupils—met mine after a while in a cold, steady, inscrutable stare; and, very slowly, he got to his feet. One hand—his right—in a side pocket of his dark coat, he walked straight across to my table and sat down.

"Cudner?"

"Looking for me, I hear," I replied, trying to match the icy smoothness of his voice, as I was matching the steadiness of his gaze.

He had sat down with his left side turned slightly toward me, which put his right arm in not too cramped a position for straight shooting from the pocket that still held his hand.

"You were looking for me, too."

I didn't know what the correct answer to that would be, so I just grinned. But the grin didn't come from my heart. I had, I realized, made a mistake—one that might cost me something before we were done. This bird wasn't hunting for Cudner as a friend, as I had carelessly assumed, but was on the war path.

I saw those three dead men falling out of the closet in room 906!

My gun was inside the waistband of my trousers, where I could get it quickly, but his was in his hand. So I was careful to keep my own hands motionless on the edge of the table while I widened my grin.

His eyes were changing now, and the more I looked at them the less I liked them. The gray in them had darkened and grown duller, and the pupils were larger, and white crescents were showing beneath the gray. Twice before I had looked into eyes such as these—and I hadn't forgotten what they meant—the eyes of the congenital killer!

"Suppose you speak your piece," I suggested after a while.

But he wasn't to be beguiled into conversation. He shook his head a mere fraction of an inch and the corners of his compressed mouth dropped down a trifle. The white crescents of eyeballs were growing broader, pushing the gray circles up under the upper lids.

It was coming! And there was no use waiting for it!

I drove a foot at his shins under the table, and at the same time

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pushed the table into his lap and threw myself across it. The bullet from his gun went off to one side. Another bullet—not from his gun—thudded into the table that was upended between us.

I had him by the shoulders when the second shot from behind took him in the left arm, just below my hand. I let go then and fell away, rolling over against the wall and twisting around to face the direction from which the bullets were coming.

I twisted around just in time to see—jerking out of sight behind a corner of the passage that gave to a small dining room—Guy Cudner's scarred face. And as it disappeared, a bullet from Orrett's gun splattered the plaster from the wall where it had been.

I grinned at the thought of what must be going on in Orrett's head as he lay sprawled out on the floor confronted by two Cudners. But he took a shot at me just then and I stopped grinning. Luckily, he had to twist around to fire at me, putting his weight on his wounded arm, and the pain made him wince, spoiling his aim.

Before he had adjusted himself more comfortably I had scrambled on hands and knees to Pigatti's kitchen door—only a few feet away—and had myself safely tucked out of range around an angle in the wall; all but my eyes and the top of my head, which I risked so that I might see what went on.

Orrett was now ten or twelve feet from me, lying flat on the floor, facing Cudner, with a gun in his hand and another on the floor beside him.

Across the room, perhaps thirty feet away, Cudner was showing himself around his protecting corner at brief intervals to exchange shots with the man on the floor, occasionally sending one my way. We had the place to ourselves. There were four exits, and the rest of Pigatti's customers had used them all.

I had my gun out, but I was playing a waiting game. Cudner, I figured, had been tipped off to Orrett's search for him and had arrived on the scene with no mistaken idea of the other's attitude. Just what there was between them and what bearing it had on the Montgomery murders was a mystery to me, but I didn't try to solve it now.

They were firing in unison. Cudner would show around his corner, both men's weapons would spit, and he would duck out of sight again. Orrett was bleeding about the head now and one of his legs sprawled crookedly behind him. I couldn't determine whether Cudner had been hit or not.

Each had fired eight, or perhaps nine, shots when Cudner suddenly jumped out into full view, pumping the gun in his left hand as fast as its mechanism would go, the gun in his right hand hanging at his side. Orrett had changed guns, and was on his knees now, his fresh weapon keeping pace with his enemy's.

That couldn't last!

Cudner dropped his left-hand gun, and, as he raised the other, he

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sagged forward and went down on one knee. Orrett stopped firing abruptly and fell over on his back—spread out full-length. Cudner fired once more—wildly, into the ceiling—and pitched down on his face.

I sprang to Orrett's side and kicked both of his guns away. He was lying still, but his eyes were open.

"Are you Cudner, or was he?"

"He."

"Good!" he said, and closed his eyes.

I crossed to where Cudner lay and turned him over on his back. His chest was literally shot to pieces.

His thick lips worked, and I put my ear down to them. "I get him?"

"Yes," I lied, "he's already cold."

His dying face twisted into a grin.

"Sorry . . . three in hotel . . . " he gasped hoarsely. "Mistake . . . wrong room . . . got one . . . had to . . . other two . . . protect myself . . . I . . ." He shuddered and died.

A week later the hospital people let me talk to Orrett. I told him what Cudner had said before he died.

"That's the way I doped it out," Orrett said from out of the depths of the bandages in which he was swathed. "That's why I moved and changed my name the next day.

"I suppose you've got it figured out by now," he said after a while.

"No," I confessed. "I haven't. I've an idea what it was all about but I could stand having a few details cleared up."

"I'm sorry I can't clear them up for you, but I've got to cover myself up. I'll tell you a story, though, and it may help you. Once upon a time there was a high-class crook—what the newspapers call a mastermind. Came a day when he found he had accumulated enough money to give up the game and settle down an honest man.

"But he had two lieutenants—one in New York and one in San Francisco—and they were the only men in the world who knew he was a crook. And, besides that, he was afraid of both of them. So he thought he'd rest easier if they were out of the way. And it happened that neither of these lieutenants had ever seen the other.

"So this mastermind convinced each of them that the other was double-crossing him and would have to be bumped off for the safety of all concerned. And both of them fell for it. The New Yorker went to San Francisco to get the other, and the San Franciscan was told that the New Yorker would arrive on such-and-such a day and would stay at such-and-such a hotel.

"The mastermind figured that there was an even chance of both men passing out when they met—and he was nearly right at that. But he was sure that one would die, and then, even if the other missed hanging, there would only be one man left for him to dispose of later."

There weren't as many details in the story as I would have liked

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to have, but it explained a lot.

"How do you figure out Cudner's getting the wrong room?"

"That was funny! Maybe it happened like this: My room was 609 and the killing was done in 906. Suppose Cudner went to the hotel on the day he knew I was due and took a quick slant at the register. He wouldn't want to be seen looking at it if he could avoid it, so he didn't turn it around, but flashed a look at it as it lay—facing the desk.

"When you read numbers of three figures upside down you have to transpose them in your head to get them straight. Like 123. You'd get that 321, and then turn them around in your head. That's what Cudner did with mine. He was keyed up, of course, thinking of the job ahead of him, and he overlooked the fact that 609 upside-down still reads 609 just the same. So he turned it around and made it 906—Develyn's room."

"That's how I doped it," I said, "and I reckon it's about right. And then he looked at the key rack and saw that 906 wasn't there. So he thought he might just as well get his job done right then, when he could roam the hotel corridors without attracting attention. Of course, he may have gone up to the room before Ansley and Develyn came in and waited for them, but I doubt it.

"I think it more likely that he simply happened to arrive at the hotel a few mintues after they had come in. Ansely was probably alone in the room when Cudner opened the unlocked door and came in—Develyn being in the bathroom getting the glasses.

"Ansley was about your size and age, and close enough in appearance to fit a rough description of you. Cudner went for him, and then Deveyln, hearing the scuffle, dropped the bottle and glasses, rushed out, and got his.

"Cudner, being the sort he was, would figure that two murders were not worse than one, and he wouldn't want to leave any witnesses around.

"And that is probably how Ingraham got into it. He was passing on his way from his room to the elevator and perhaps heard the racket and investigated. And Cudner put a gun in his face and made him stow the two bodies in the clothespress. And then he stuck his knife in Ingraham's back and slammed the door on him. That's about the—"

An indignant nurse descended on me from behind and ordered me out of the room, accusing me of getting her patient excited.

Orrett stopped me as I turned to go.

"Keep your eye on the New York dispatches," he said, "and maybe you'll get the rest of the story. It's not over yet. Nobody has anything on me out here. That shooting in Pigatti's was self-defense so far as I'm concerned. And as soon as I'm on my feet again and can get back East there's going to be a mastermind holding a lot of lead. That's a promise!"

I believed him. ●

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BLACK MASK

TWO THOUSAND VOLTS

by Chuck Hogan

It was a diner off the interstate exit, pushed back from the road to make room for a truck turnaround.

The customer with the handgun inside his jacket sat on the first red-padded stool at the front counter, the seat closest to the takeout register. He had come in alone, ordered a Coke. Other than turning to watch every car pulling in, he sat there as patiently as night waiting for day.

Sam, the grill man, worked out in front. He lifted off two half-pounders of cooked patty meat and tucked them into prepared rolls, wrapped them up tight in a square of wax paper, and then dropped them into a yellow Best Burger To-Go sack. He thumbed three or four yellow Best Burger napkins off the top of the stack next to the register and stuffed them into the sack before folding and curling down the top. The moves were routine, automatic, normally requiring no thought—except that Sam could feel the counter customer eyeing him. The woman he was serving paid and thanked him and carried her burgers out the door.

The counter stool croaked, metal grating against metal, and Sam thought the customer was turning to watch the woman leave. She wasn't much to look at from behind, but she was a woman.

A green sedan came rolling up outside, tires popping gravel. The young driver took off his sunglasses and carefully laid them upside-down on the dash before getting out. Sam saw that the cus-

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tomer was still turned toward the front windows.

Sam knew then that the customer wasn't watching the woman.

This sudden feeling made him turn away. He went to scrape the grill top clean, watching the counter customer out of the corner of his eye. Sam tensed as he saw the man reach over near the register—only to pull a yellow Best Burger napkin down off the stack.

The customer clicked the top of a ballpoint pen and scratched down something on the napkin quick, no more than a word or two or three. Sam had to look away then or else be caught snooping.

When he casually turned back toward the counter, the pen was gone. The napkin too, almost as though he had replaced it on the stack. The customer's hands rested still and empty on the chrome-edged Formica.

The bell jingled over the door and the young man walked inside. He blinked a bit and glanced around—his first time here—then nodded to Sam and stepped to the takeout counter. "How's it going?" he said.

Up close, the man was not as young as he had appeared. He wore a light black jacket over a blue shirt and khaki pants. Someone, probably a girlfriend, had taken care to snip his hair short and tight so that it stood up on his skull in pinched clumps like little black flames.

The customer seated at the counter didn't look up.

"What can I getcha?" said Sam, working his hands into the towel that hung from his belt.

The man went rummaging through his pockets, finding a torn slip of paper. "Uh—a Double-wide Best Burger, rare, extra mayo, hold the pickles, hold the cheese."

"Sandwich or meal?" said Sam. "Meal comes with fries and slaw."

"Meal, I guess."

"For a dollar more, you get two half-pounders. Today's special. Comes with a side order of Lipitor and a chair to nap in."

The man smiled and gave what amounted to a courtesy laugh. "No—just the one, thanks."

"One Double, still mooing, mayo, no picks, no cheese."

Sam turned to the grill and was reaching for the plump patties in the grill-side cooler when the counter customer said—

"I'll have the same."

Sam stopped and looked back at him. The takeout man looked too, for the first time, Sam expecting an electric moment of recognition on his face. But there was nothing. Just an amiable nod from the takeout man to the customer on the stool next to him, stranger-to-stranger. The counter customer nodded back and looked at the grill.

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Sam took up two cool patties and played them down side-by-side, hitting the cooking surface with an immediate crackle of meat on heat. Sam didn't like what he was feeling. He had seen the customer's gun tucked under his arm when he'd first sat down. He'd seen his eyes, which looked prepossessed, and somehow—almost—familiar. Sam decided to forget about him, or else try. He focused on the takeout guy.

"First time here?" Sam said, turning back.

"First time, yeah."

"Best burger in seventeen counties."

"So I've heard, so I've heard." The man drummed his fingers on the glass over the display counter showing mugs and T-shirts featuring the Best Burger logo: a friendly hamburger with arched eyebrows and stick-thin arms holding up a sign that read, "EAT ME."

Sam said, "You work at the pen?"

The man stopped drumming. He looked down, checking himself, wondering where upon him it was written.

"Your car," said Sam. "The blue state tags. We get a lot of guards loading up before and after shifts."

The man nodded, relieved. "I'm not a guard, though," he said.

"I know. Your shoes."

The man looked down at them. "You're pretty good," he said.

Sam gave him a friendly shrug before checking on the burgers. The coolness had run out of them and he flattened each with the spatula, spilling juice for them to simmer in. *Rare*, he remembered, plucking up two pairs of buns and going at them with mayo from the tub. "Another busy one up there tonight, huh?"

"You could say."

"About how many votes they run through them?" When Sam said "volts" it came out sounding like "votes."

"I don't know exactly. I think two thousand's the number."

He laid the buns out on the stainless ledge in front of the grill and said, "That'd be enough." Execution nights were generally slow. A feeling of unease settled over the entire region, like the threat of bad weather. "Which one is it tonight?"

"Uh—Mossman? Sonny Mossman."

"Mossman. Oh, yeah. I remember. The little girl, wasn't it?"

"A couple of girls, I think. And two grown women. But they got him for the girl."

Sam nodded. "They came round here afterward. That's how I remember. Asking questions." Sam flipped the burgers as he spoke, the patties hissing in protest as they were turned. "He'd been in here that night."

"Here?" said the man, with more surprise and unease than Sam expected. Almost with concern.

"The very same night." Sam laid up the spatula over the front lip of the grill and leaned back against the serving ledge. "How'd they

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get him? Fingerprints, wasn't it?"

"One fingerprint. In the trunk of his car. And, like, two strands of her hair."

"Didn't he confess, though?"

"At first. Then he recanted. They couldn't use it—I forget why."

"Reading him his rights, maybe."

"I don't know. They never found the murder weapon either. Dredged three lakes around here, trying to turn it up."

"Right, right. Didn't make any friends of the fishermen that week. What was it?"

The man squinted in confusion. "What was what?"

"The weapon."

The man shrugged. "Got me there."

They both kind of nodded quietly, ready to quit the topic for something more agreeable like the weather or sports.

"A claw hammer," said the customer at the counter.

The man turned to him. He stared, and Sam stared. "You said . . . ?" said the takeout man—not because he hadn't understood him, but because he never expected it. Because he knew more was coming.

"It was a claw hammer."

It was quiet then except for the sizzle. Sam put things together, first slowly, then all at once. The shoulder holster, the eyes.

"I remember you," Sam said. "You were heavier then." Words escaped before he had time to properly consider them. "You had pictures for us. Asked me where he sat . . ." His voice tailed off, the memory returning full-bloom.

"He sat right here," said the detective. "Right in this seat." He laid his palms flat against the countertop and looked around the diner. "This place was one of his compulsions. He said he could never pass by without stopping in. Best Burger was his favorite food."

He said this last part looking at the takeout man from the penitentiary, who appeared stricken. He hadn't moved.

"He stopped here that night. Parked right outside and sat down here and ordered himself a Double-wide. He ate his burger and drank a large Coke. The girl he'd snatched, her name was Kelly-Louise Traynor. Six years old. She was still out in his trunk. Still alive."

Ice shifted in his glass. Otherwise nothing moved.

Sam said, "You were the one who caught him?"

The detective squinted, having gone off thinking about something else.

"He had hidden his car somewheres," said Sam, more and more coming back to him now. "Tried to clean it. Finding it is what did him in."

"Fourth finger, right hand." The detective showed them, rubbing

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his with the pad of his thumb. "On a fire extinguisher Mossman kept in the trunk. Two blonde hair strands in the carpet."

"Two thin strands," said Sam. "The difference between him being up there . . . or being out here."

"Being right here," said the detective, occupying the killer's seat in front of him.

Sam didn't like him having to say that. He couldn't see how this involved him.

"You're heading up to watch?" asked Sam. "You on your way up there now?"

"Me?" said the detective. He shook his head. "I'm on my way home." He looked past Sam to the grill. "Just stopped off here for a bite to eat."

Sam went silent then. After a moment he returned to the grill and the cooking meat. He pressed down with the spatula, bleeding off juice, before remembering he had done that already.

The burgers were ready. He lifted off the sizzling patties, one at a time, laying them onto the waiting buns. The clock on the wall said a little before six. Sam, who could normally juggle seven separate orders in his head, was having trouble focusing, and had to look back at the takeout man. "That was—no cheese?"

The man went back into his jacket pocket for the slip of paper, found it, unfolded it, turned it right-side up. He cleared his throat before speaking. "No cheese. No pickles."

Sam focused on the torn paper in the man's hand. "It's not for you?"

"No," answered the man. He tried to look casual.

Sam swallowed. He looked over near the detective. "And yours?"

"No cheese. No pickles. Exact same."

Sam turned back to the open-faced burgers. He covered up the patties with the mayonnaise-slathered buns. He had the feeling he was being made part of something he wanted no part in.

He prepped two meal orders of fries and slaw, one going into a plastic serving basket lined with paper, the other into a Best Burger To-Go sack. He brought the two burgers around, side by side, not knowing what to do. He set them down before the two customers.

Sam said, "Which one do you . . . ?"

The takeout man said nothing.

The detective told Sam, "You choose."

Sam hated him for saying that. He looked at the takeout man, who wouldn't meet his eye—then he wrapped one burger and dropped it into the sack, laying the other down in the basket of fries. He set the basket meal in front of the detective. The takeout man paid cash and asked for a receipt.

"Don't forget napkins," said the detective.

Sam, rushing now, thumbed six or seven yellow Best Burger nap-

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kins off the top of the stack and stuffed them into the bag and rolled the top shut. He wanted the takeout man to leave now.

The takeout man did leave. The detective didn't turn to watch him go. He waited until the bell over the door stopped ringing and the engine started up and the tires rolled back popping over the gravel. Then he took the sandwich into his hands. Sam saw it still steaming, saw the bottom of the bun already sagging with grease. He watched the detective bite in deep, and felt a tang in the back of his own throat, almost sick-making. He saw grease and juice run down over the man's fingers, dripping into the basket, and then he had to look away.

Cooper drove the Ford sedan up the interstate back toward the penitentiary. He hadn't cared at all for that cop in the diner. Trying to make him feel bad. Cooper's job sucked, no question. He worked at the pen because it was a night job and they reimbursed half his tuition. But as to job satisfaction, there was zero. Cooper wasn't out catching killers. He did what he was told. They sent him out to pick up a sandwich—and he was happy to do it. Happy to get away from there, even just for thirty minutes. Drudgery pervaded the pen like a factory choking on its own pollution. So what did he have to apologize for? That he wasn't rich? That he had to work to make a better life for himself?

A claw hammer.

He was angry. He'd had to put the sack into the trunk, which was the last thing he'd wanted to do after listening to that cop—open a car trunk—but it was his boss's order. Cooper would be passing protesters on the way back inside, and they weren't to see the food or anything else that might set them off.

He almost regretted stealing those few fries out of the bag—at the same time wishing he had some more. The Coke was handy, stuck into the cup holder at his side, so he righted the steering wheel with his knees and popped the clear plastic top off the cup and took a few sweet sips. He was returning it and trying to squeeze the cover back on when he thought he heard a thumping inside the trunk. It stopped his heart for a second. Like that feeling that someone is hiding behind you in the car.

For a moment he imagined he were Mossman, driving into the woods with someone bound and gagged in his trunk, knowing what he was going to do to them . . .

The penitentiary exit surprised him and he looked down and saw that he was doing eighty-one. The wheels squealed as he took it too fast.

Early protesters were indeed assembling with their signs and bullhorns and candles—ready to make a night of it. How good it must feel to stand for something, he thought. To commit oneself to a lost cause. To gather with other like-minded souls and lock arms

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and sing songs under the stars. Wallowing in futility. Championing it, actually. How wonderful it must be to fight only losing battles. How safe and how comfortable. To posit yourself squarely on the side of peace and good. How brave the sand on an eroding beach.

They stared through his windshield as he slowed near the front gates. Cooper was nobody to them, but the sedan was a prison vehicle, and so one of them—a woman wearing a black robe, her hair drawn back fiercely into a long white-gray whip—pounded once on the roof over his head, so startling Cooper that his foot hit the gas pedal, jerking the vehicle forward, almost running over three people.

They scattered out of his way pretty fast after that. He thought about stopping and walking back to confront them. Not with cant, but with food. Passing around the bag of French fries, one to each. And then asking them, Is this really whose last supper you want to be at?

He parked inside the safety perimeter and stood before the trunk with keys in hand before opening it and finding the food sack tipped over onto its side. Grease soaked the side of the bag, leaving a dark oily stain on the carpet lining the trunk, and Cooper erupted suddenly, unleashing a string of bitter curses into the prison night, even though it wasn't his fault and it wasn't even his car.

Sonny Mossman looked up from where he sat on the slab bed of his special holding cell. They had just shaved his head and one leg. A Restraint Team guard entered in full kit—riot helmet, spit shield, lineman's gloves, breastplate, jump boots—with two others backing him, their steel batons extended. The Restraint Team ran the Death Tank because some cons lose it at the end. They go screaming like a virgin to the flaming stake. But not Sonny.

The lead guard brought him a familiar yellow paper sack all grease-soaked on the bottom and one side. He set it on the shelf with the Coke and then stood there a moment looking at Sonny through his goggles. They think it's their job to eye-rape you. They backed out and closed the tank door and Sonny stood and went to the bag.

His mouth was already filling up with saliva. He'd been looking forward to this for a long time now. The only thing he *had* to look forward to. If they really wanted to hurt him, they would have brought this in and showed it to him, pushed it into his face—then taken it away. Left his stomach jumping like a stuck puppy.

Sonny opened the sack and quickly unwrapped the big, soggy burger. He took it in his thick fingers and bit in quick—and the taste exploded in his mouth. It was perfect, made just the way he liked it. He chewed through half of it before realizing that this was it, there wasn't anymore, and maybe he should slow down.

He lifted out the fries and napkins and set aside the coleslaw. He smiled at the cartoon burger with the "EAT ME" sign on the napkin. It put him right back inside Best Burger: the front counter

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with the busted stools and the meat cooked in front of you by the grill man with fast, mechanical hands.

Sonny opened a napkin to tuck into his collar the way his grandmother taught him. He saw the wet wrinkle first, and realized that this was a used napkin. Somebody had already swiped their dirty mouth on it. Then, unfolding the napkin further—he saw the writing.

He recognized the penmanship right off. He knew it from the court papers. Sonny read the girl's name and then his eyes lost focus.

Everything went bland as he wondered how that goddamn cop got to his food. The rumbling in his stomach continued, but the wanting was like a distant thunder now. He had cotton all wadded up in his mouth. His eyes were wide and blank as he faced the green-painted wall, on the other side of which was the last room he would ever see.

The detective drove home, his gut full, the rare meat roiling. A wave of nausea raised a sheen of sweat over his skin like condensation forming on glass. He kept swallowing to put out the fire. He would keep the burger down. He had to.

Prostate cancer had turned him into a vegetarian. Nuts and grains and kale and okra. Three-plus years without red meat, until today. Three-plus years cancer-free.

The meal burned like a cancer in his belly. It bloated him, his stomach acids hitting it with everything they'd got. Turmoil and torment: his gut the final circle of hell.

Tomorrow he would deliver it where it belonged and be done.

He went into a sort of trance as he drove. Something like a fever dream—only, it was real. A memory. One he returned to willingly now.

He was inside the girl's bedroom again. The mother had left it untouched, as grieving mothers do. He asked for a minute alone. She went out without questioning it and he gently closed the door. He pulled on his gloves and looked around. Everything was in pink and yellow—a dead girl's room decorated in fringe and frill. He scrutinized every windowpane. He breathed on the mirror glass, raising prints, none of them pristine. He had to be very careful now. He had just found Mossman's abandoned car in the woods. Nobody else knew yet. He stood underneath the still ceiling fan, full to bursting with this knowledge, eyeing the soft toys, the dolls, the figurines. He needed a surface that was flat and hard and smooth. He found a china tea set on the top shelf of her bookcase and pulled it down. Tiny little finger cups done in a fine, glassy finish. Using a prepared strip of tape, he lifted one perfect print. He held it to the sunlight. Graceful hairpin whorls, unbroken by crease of injury or wrinkle of age. It would transfer faintly yet true. He then selected a hair bow from a drawer full of ribbons and clips and used tweezers to unwind from it two strands of fair hair. He slipped them into a manila coin envelope, which he then slipped inside his jacket pocket. He did this lovingly. He made the case. He did his job.

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❖ ❖ ❖

Sam, the grill man, lay on his side on the back-room cot, listening to Conway Twitty on the clock radio. His shift had ended at ten, but the diner stayed open all night, the grill never going cold. Sam was back on the clock at six A.M., and it was easier just to crash there than drive all the way home and back.

He felt weird about the detective. That was what had him still awake near midnight—that and his empty stomach, for which the smell of the burgers cooking suggested no cure. He couldn't get it out of his mind. Did the detective blame Sam for having served somebody he didn't know was a killer? Sam didn't feel real good about having fed a guy who had a little girl locked up in the trunk of his car—but then, who knew what the detective had locked up in his? Who knows what anybody has locked away?

Okay—tonight he knew. He had figured out what that takeout burger was, who it was for. He supposed he could've spit on it. Would that have made the detective like him better? He could've not finished cooking it. Thrown it into the trash—made a great big show.

But he did cook it. He wrapped it up and sold it to the man from the prison. He put the money in his cash register.

And he served the detective his. Grilled it for him and served it up like his own enemy's heart.

A killer would die tonight with one of Sam's burgers in his belly. Be buried with it in the morning. Packed up together with his earthly remains in a to-go pine box.

Sam rolled onto his back. He pictured the detective finishing his burger, wiping the juice off his empty hands. Sitting still awhile at the counter, disappearing into himself. Then standing, laying money next to the empty Coke, heading home. The bell jingling on his way out the door.

The radio cut out first, before anything else. Going to static—a disruption over the airwaves.

Then the lights flickered. The rattling air conditioner unit outside the back door clicked off, shutting down.

Lights dimmed, surging off and on for ten seconds . . . fifteen seconds . . . twenty seconds. A deep draw on the grid. Sam imagined an aerial view, lights dimming all across the county in one long, complicit blink.

They flickered once more, then came back on. The air conditioner kick-started again, whirring back to life, and the static cleared and the radio music resumed playing, the same song, the glowing red digits of the clock now blinking 12:00 like a sign urgently advertising midnight.

Two thousand volts.

Sam rolled over and hoped his appetite would return in the morning. ●

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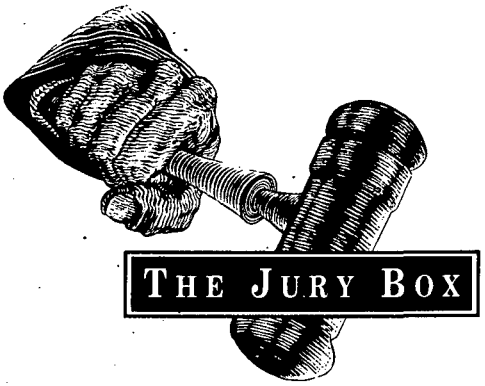

by Jon L. Breen

Black Mask, greatest of the twentieth-century crime-fiction pulps, published over half the fifty-plus stories in Otto Penzler's huge trade paperback anthology *The Black Lizard Big Book of Pulps* (Vintage, $25), an admirable collection of mostly unfamiliar material. Covering the 1920s through '40s, its three sections —crimefighters, introduced by Penzler; villains, introduced by Harlan Ellison; and dames, introduced by Laura Lippman— were published separately in Britain. Three selections each by Dashiell Hammett (including the powerful and previously unpublished "Faith"), Raymond Chandler, Erle Stanley Gardner, and Cornell Woolrich join novel-length works by Carroll John Daly and Frederick Nebel and stories by Horace McCoy, Thomas Walsh, Richard Sale, George Harmon Coxe, Frank Gruber, and James M. Cain. Among the more obscure items are a pair of enjoyable (if implausibly plotted) stories about D. B. McCandless's Sarah Watson, a tough, chubby, and middle-aged female private eye, who antedated Gardner's Bertha Cool.

Black Mask's most significant innovation was the hardboiled private eye. Joining Hammett and Chandler in the P.I. pantheon, and believed by iconic critic Anthony Boucher the greatest of the three, Ross Macdonald came on the scene after the great days of the pulps had passed. His reputation has been kept alive through the efforts of Tom Nolan, first with his 1999 biography and most recently with *The Archer Files* (Crippen & Landru, $45 hardcover, $25 trade paper), which gathers all the previously published short stories about Lew Archer. Nolan's excellent introduction gathers the surprising range of biographical details on the Southern California shamus scattered through the novels and stories. A selection of tantalizing openings to unfinished Archer cases are not throwaway false starts but scenes as polished and memorable as the

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author's finished work.

Among the Archer novels in reprint from Vintage/Black Lizard is the 1951 case *The Way Some People Die* ($12.95)—although not as fine as the work Macdonald would do in the '60s and '70s, it was deemed by Boucher the best of its kind since *Farewell, My Lovely* or even *The Maltese Falcon.*

As the following examples show, the condition of the private eye today remains healthy.

**** Richard Aleas: *Songs of Innocence,* Hard Case Crime, $6.99. Three years after quitting detective work for the Columbia University writing program, John Blake tries to prove the apparent suicide of a girlfriend and fellow student, who had a secret life in the Manhattan sex industry, was really murder. Aleas (pseudonym of Charles Ardai) tops his Edgar-nominated debut *Little Girl Lost* in this man-on-the-run thriller, expertly crafted in every way and ending with one of the most shocking and chilling conclusions in recent memory.

**** Anne Argula: *Walla Walla Suite*, Ballantine, $12.95. Spokane policewoman Quinn's debut in *Homicide My Own* was a unique police procedural, and her return as Seattle private eye, working mostly for a mitigation investigator whose job it is to save convicted murderers from hanging, is nearly as unconventional, though lacking the earlier book's supernatural overtones. Quinn's Pennsylvania coal-country slang takes getting used to, but her voice is among the most original on the current scene.

**** Walter Mosley: *Blonde Faith,* Little, Brown, $25.95. In late 1960s L.A., a Vietnam veteran disappears, leaving his young daughter in the care of his friend Easy Rawlins, troubled following the break-up of his long-term relationship. Centered on the shifting tides of American race relations and the psychological journey of its protagonist, this is one of the most remarkable series in contemporary crime fiction.

**** Bill Pronzini: *Savages,* Forge, $24.95. Of current private eye series, San Francisco's Nameless Detective (known by third-person necessity as Bill) is certainly the longest running and arguably the best. Now virtually semi-retired and concerned about his wife's breast-cancer scare, Bill reluctantly takes on a previously dissatisfied client, who wishes to prove her sister's supposedly accidental death was really murder. His case and operative Jake Runyon's, unrelated but sharing a thematic unity, are both satisfactorily and surprisingly solved, with fairly laid clues, and one of them features a chilling murder motive that may be unique in fictional annals.

*** Parnell Hall: *Hitman,* Pegasus, $24. New Yorker Stanley Hastings, whose usual bread and butter is documenting slip-and-fall cases for a personal injury lawyer, takes on one of the strangest job assignments since "The Red-Headed League": stopping a hired killer who

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wants to quit the trade from completing his latest assignment. As usual, Hall delivers smart dialogue, humorous observations, semi-farcical complications leading to a logical conclusion, and fidelity to the rules of fair play.

*** Mark Coggins: *Runoff,* Bleak House, $24.95 hardcover, $14.95 trade paper. Part-time jazz bassist August Riordan stumbles over bodies, has the Dragon Lady of San Francisco's Chinatown for a client, and even encounters Chandler's favorite scene saver, the sudden appearance of a guy with a gun, but the easy, humorous style, details on computerized election fraud, and sharply observed Bay Area background make it all most enjoyable. Riordan's main associate is not the muscled sociopath of some series but a tech-savvy standards-singing drag queen.

*** Loren D. Estleman: *American Detective,* Forge, $24.95. Detroit's Amos Walker, solidly in the loner tradition and a conscious anachronism in the twenty-first century, participates in much physical action, including the traditional blow to the head, all described in one of the most dazzling prose styles extant. The initial job, soon complicated by murder, is to discourage the daughter of a retired Tiger pitcher from marrying an apparent fortune hunter. The case includes another Asian-American Dragon Lady.

*** Peter Spiegelman: *Red Cat,* Knopf, $22.95. New York sleuth John March takes on as client his unpleasant brother, who is being stalked by a woman he met online for casual sex. The inventive plot is solidly contemporary, the characters and background strongly conveyed, the style reminiscent of the masters.

** Marcia Muller: *The Ever-Running Man,* Warner, $24.99. San Francisco's Sharon McCone, one of the best and longest running examples of the new-style non-loner, family-oriented P.I., goes to work for husband Hy Ripinsky, whose worldwide industrial security firm has been the target of bombings by the odd-gaited jogging miscreant of the title. An outlandish plot and soap opera excesses won't deter regular readers, but newcomers should try earlier novels. (Muller, even better at short stories, gathers nineteen of her best in *Somewhere in the City* [Pegasus, $15.95]. Most have been previously collected; some involve McCone or her associates.)

** Michael Harvey: *The Chicago Way,* Knopf, $23.95. The Windy City's Michael Kelly unofficially reopens an old case that got his former police partner killed. Making this Renaissance sleuth a jogging Cubs fan who reads *The Iliad* in the original Greek seems more parodic than believable; stock characters and plot clichés stack up relentlessly. There's enough narrative impetus and stylistic flair to sustain reader interest, but disregard the outrageous hype. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

SANTA WITH SUNGLASSES

by William Link

Gino Benedetti was her nemesis. Megan's contempt for him had not yet reached the level of blind hatred, but it was climbing slowly, like the box-office numbers of her current film. The latest irony was that he had shot her and other arriving members of the cast at the gala premiere in Manhattan.

Benedetti was a charter member of the Hollywood paparazzi, a ravenous group of scavengers who fed on the live meat of movie celebrities rather than on the bleeding flesh of roadkill. The unfortunate aftermath was that after the photos were published, the careers of some did indeed become roadkill.

She had no idea why he had fastened his callous lens on her. She was a rising young actress at mid-level stardom, courted already by the entertainment media. But even though she considered herself a hip, college-educated New Yorker, she usually let her press people do all the flesh-pressing.

Was Benedetti somehow in love with her natural beauty? Although most of Hollywood beauty these days, she had to admit, was as natural as a computer graphic or Burt Reynolds's hairline. Maybe it was what Oscar Wilde had written: We always kill what we love.

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The reason for his fascination was relatively unimportant. Megan and her producer husband Arnold couldn't attend an awards dinner or go to a rave club on Melrose without Benedetti's intrusive Nikon in their faces or their windshield. But he was especially lasered in on her. He never spoke or joked, flirted, like some of his equally desperate cohorts. He was just a painfully thin, ferret-like young man with slick, combed-back black hair who circled, danced, paraded around her, the camera like an obscene clicking insect in his thrusting hands. He always wore sunglasses, the lenses opaque, black as midnight. She had heard his fervent dream was getting the cover of *People*.

William Link and his former writing partner Richard Levinson are considered by many to be the most successful collaboration in television history: What few know is that the duo began their professional writing career in *EQMM*, in 1954. They went on to conceive such immortal TV characters as Columbo and worked together until Levinson's death in 1987. Mr. Link has gone on to write other top shows, including *The Cosby Mysteries*.

Christmas Day, they had been invited to a brunch at the home of a producer friend of her husband's, Jay Graham.

She had left Arnold sleeping off a massive hangover and gone with her stepson Toby to the party, stunned to see the mansion's lawns and surrounding trees blanketed with snow: a glaring, blinding-white wonderland. When was the last time it had snowed in Beverly Hills? Ever?

Jay explained the phenomenon to her while his adored and adorable daughter Samantha opened her Christmas gifts.

Samantha had read about, or seen on the tube, white Christmases all over the world. How come, she asked her father, she had never seen one out here?

"What could I do, Megan?" Jay asked. "You know I would climb mountains for the child. And then it hit me!".

The solution was his studio bringing trucks at five in the morning and spraying pulverized ice all over their mini-estate. Jay made sure he and his wife were with Samantha in her bedroom when she woke and saw a strange, wavering, eye-dazzling lake of light on the ceiling. Then she ran to the window and experienced her first white Christmas. Perfect, Megan thought: God, like everyone else, was on the studio payroll.

They went back to the periphery of parents monitoring the gift-opening ceremony. Megan saw that the crowd was made up of mostly movie people, no TV stars. In the rigid Hollywood caste system, the Brahmins of the Big Screen rarely consorted with the

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television Untouchables. And no one was even gawking out the windows at the "snow." But then in Beverly Hills, *no one* would ever be caught gawking at anything.

Only later did Santa and his merry elves appear to frolic with the youngsters. Toby seemed bored with them, fascinated only with one of Samantha's gifts, a Cyber-shot digital camera. "I want one," he whined.

"You'll get one for your birthday," Megan promised.

"That long?" At nine he was already a demanding, overweight brat, a classic TV couch potato who could maneuver his father like a studio animal wrangler. Unfortunately, Dad was fat and demanding too. Sometimes she wished, if it were possible, she could drown them both in their gene pool.

And then she realized that Santa, surprisingly thin in his unpadded red costume, was taking pictures of the children, even at angles that included their parents' famous faces. She saw too, with a tightening fist of anger in her gut, that Santa was wearing sunglasses.

She quickly ducked away as he tried to take her and Toby's picture, and nudged the nearby Jay on his arm. "Santa," she said quietly. "Where did you get him?"

"Agency. Why?"

"He's Gino Benedetti, king of the paparazzi, grabbing photos he'll be selling to all takers tomorrow."

Blood climbed high in Jay's face. "You're sure?"

"I'd be the last person to get you sued, Jay."

"Thanks." He strode angrily off toward Santa, who was shooting pictures now of his vulnerable Samantha, who was grinningly aiming her new camera back at him.

He was making her life a living hell. Now he had followed her to her boyfriend Judd's apartment in West Hollywood. Megan had seen the anonymous gray SUV moving discreetly on her tail while she drove there from Brentwood, and the klaxon of her fears had sounded like an air-raid siren. Arnold had recently hired a new butler, Tanner, a frozen-faced, self-effacing older Brit, whom she detested every time he obsequiously nodded when she entered a room. Was he on the paparazzo's payroll, alerting him every time she left the house?

Judd and she had never connected that afternoon, which had led to the relationship's preordained destruction, her final Dear John (Judd) phone call. He had been fun, a sexy distraction, but she was sure her bemused, work-obsessed husband probably wouldn't have cared even if he saw a photo of them in coitus with Benedetti's imprimatur. She had discussed Benedetti with him and received a waved-hand dismissal. "These guys come with the territory, honey. Termites at a lumberyard. We just have to learn to live with them."

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She began to think he liked appearing in the movie magazines and the supermarket tabloids with her. Good exposure, she thought, for him and his latest epic.

Almost every afternoon, when she wasn't shooting, she took a few laps in their pool and tried to teach Toby how to swim. It was a momentous waste of time: The boy mostly paddled in the safe shallow end, splashed the red and yellow ducks she had bought him as a two-year-old, and listened to the rap music blaring from his transistor on the apron of the pool. He treated her like a servant.

After he went back in the house, she usually stripped off her bikini and swam luxuriously back and forth, experiencing the liberated pleasure of heated water stroking her sleek, naked body, a freedom that she had reveled in since she was a child in the Hamptons. She felt perfectly protected, since at this late hour in the afternoon the servants were in the far wing of the house attending to dinner and there were high stucco walls surrounding the pool on all sides. There was only the blue, cloudless ceiling of sky overhead, devoid of peering paparazzi helicopters or Cessnas. She doubted Benedetti had the money for a satellite.

Of course, her afternoon idylls came to an abrupt end when the *Enquirer* published a nude shot and then the Internet proliferated the outrage. It showed only her face and her bare, ample breasts (she was emerging from the pool), but that was enough to get (no pun) exposure on *Entertainment Tonight* among other shows, and show-biz immortalization in Jay Leno's monologue.

Again, Arnold seemed undisturbed. She argued angrily with him at the dinner table that she had become a laughingstock not only in the hermetic, front-stabbing Hollywood community but across the country. She tried to convince him that there was, paradoxically, a bad side to good publicity that could cripple a career in its incubator.

Stepson Toby was no help. "They've been talking about it in school," he said, more impressed with this than he had been with her in her best films. He made it a point of never calling her Mom or Mother. "My friend Scott downloaded it and taped it on my gym locker!"

"Doesn't that embarrass you?" she asked him, incredulously.

He shrugged pudgy shoulders. "Nope. Scott says you got much bigger ones than *his* stepmom's!"

She noticed that their blank-faced butler Tanner had been standing silently near the kitchen door throughout their whole conversation. Usually he remained in the kitchen until he served the next course. Either he was someone who soaked up salaciousness like a thirsty sponge or maybe her earlier suspicions had been correct.

The next morning she was about to unload these suspicions on her husband when the phone rang, her line.

It was her agent, with some demoralizing news: She had been up

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to get the costarring role with Kevin Costner in his new movie (a big career jump), but the producers had opted to go elsewhere. Sorry, honey, luck of the draw, but there'll be others, trust me . . . etc.

That would be the day, trusting an agent. She hung up on the man's further stream of reassurances. "That was Allan," she told her husband. "I lost the Kevin Costner thing."

"Why?"

"My God, Arnold, why do you think?"

For the first time, he seemed concerned. He even left his spoon in his banana-laden corn flakes.

Bare breasts in the *Enquirer* was one thing, losing a prime part was another. "Who's producing the picture?"

"David Salter and his partner."

"I know Dave. I'll call him, find out what happened."

Over, done. He went back to his corn flakes.

"Aren't you at least interested in how somebody got the photo of me?"

He napkined his mouth, simultaneously looking at his watch, late for a meeting at the studio. "Yes, yes, of course. It's that guy you hate, whatsisname?"

"Benedetti. Gino Benedetti. Those people pay people, Arnold, clerks at the hotels, people who arrange celebrity travel schedules, even servants in our homes."

"I know all that. What are you getting at, honey? I'm late for a meeting."

"The new butler you hired. The nodding, silent suckup Tanner?"

"This Benedetti paid him? You know this for a fact?"

"No. But if Benedetti was going to make a deal with anyone in this household I'd say Tanner would be his conspirator of choice."

That afternoon, she decided to stay away from the pool, which was just fine with Toby because he would not be subjected to her private torture regime: swimming lessons. He could play his video games with his omnipresent Cokes and potato chips. She swore he and his father were prime candidates someday for a gastric bypass.

In the study, Megan had picked up the phone to call her agent when she was surprised to see Tanner in the doorway. He was no longer in his servant's coat and dark trousers. Now he wore a double-breasted suit and respectful tie. His face was pained, as if he had just been forced to go on a castor-oil regimen.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, madam. But I wanted to say goodbye."

"Goodbye? Where are you going, Tanner?"

He stood more spine-erect than usual, like a recalcitrant schoolboy in front of the principal. "I was telephonically dismissed this morning."

"By my husband?" She was more surprised than angry.

"Yes, madam. He questioned me about a gentleman I have never

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heard of, I believe Benedetti is the name. He intimated that I had taken a photograph of you, ma'am, in dishabille, and sold it to Mr. Benedetti. I told your husband I had no knowledge of the incident he was referring to. But he is very generously releasing me with three months' remuneration."

She had totally misjudged Tanner. He was obviously a gentleman of the Old School, a class that had been dismissed years back. What she had condemned as obsequiousness was merely a form of respectful politeness. His silence was just that—he did not chatter or volunteer an opinion, waiting until his master gave him an order. God, it was almost comical—how had she missed it?—he was a living stereotype, the perfect *movie* butler!

Megan rose from her chair. "Tanner," she said, her tone graver than she wanted, "this has been some kind of terrible mistake. I don't want you to leave. I promise you I will clear everything up with my husband."

"Yes, madam." The smile was a man sucking on a lemon. "With your permission I will return to my duties."

He left, and she just stood there, dealing with the breadth and depth of her ignorance.

Later, she drove her Jaguar around to the back of the property: There was only one high tree, an ancient elm, that stood outside the high stucco wall that protected their pool. If someone climbed it they would have a perfect view of the pool and the perfect angle to get the shot of her emerging from the water. But as she carefully inspected the tree, she couldn't find any evidence on the bark that anyone had ever climbed up. An old tree, but still a virgin.

Driving back to the house, she was convinced that it was an "outside job," as the cops say in the heist movies. If not the elm, where could someone have been positioned to get the "money shot"?

When she returned to the house, Tanner was waiting for her at the door, announcing that her friend Mrs. Kitridge was in the study.

Puzzled, she went to the study, wondering why Sue Kitridge was paying her an unannounced visit. They had talked on the phone that morning and Sue hadn't mentioned anything about getting together.

Sue was Megan's age, blond, intelligent, unassuming; a good friend and a decent person. She had nothing to do with the business, which downgraded her as a "civilian" in Hollywood parlance. Her son Alec was one of Toby's schoolmates.

"Can I get you something?" Megan asked. "Coffee, some tea?"

For a neat, well-groomed person, Sue looked a bit disheveled today. Megan wondered if it was something about the photo, but they had discussed that ad infinitum this morning on the phone.

Sue removed a snapshot from her handbag and wordlessly handed it to her. At first she thought it was the now infamous picture, but

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she quickly realized it was different: This one revealed her breasts *and* her privates.

"Sue," she stammered, "where—?"

"I caught Alec with it. I can guarantee you he's going to be severely punished."

"But where—?"

"Toby. He's been selling them in school. This is a terrible thing to tell you, but you know we're such good friends, so—so I thought it was something you'd want to know."

Megan nodded, still peering at the photo. In a way she was relieved—she no longer had to build her stupid sand castles on suspicions of butlers and elm trees.

"Where could Toby have gotten it?" Sue asked.

"I don't know," she lied. "But rest assured, I'm going to find out."

She reached over and grabbed Sue's hands. "You're a dear, dear friend and you mustn't feel you've hurt me."

Sue smiled faintly, her hands squeezing Megan's in return.

While Toby was snacking before dinner in the kitchen, Megan made a quick search of his room. She found a digital camera, but it was a different model than Samantha's gift. Didn't matter: The once murky waters were clearing, and another, more sinister picture was slowly coming up in the developing tray.

Toby had coveted his friend's camera and "Santa," observing that at the brunch, had seized on the opening. Get a juicy photo of Stepmom and there was money for Toby. He probably even gave him a free digital to do the dirty work, which must have maximized the boy's incentive. Benedetti had probably scoped out the house and seen the inviting elm, but why use that when he had an accomplice now in the very heart, if not the breast, of the victim?

Megan changed into her bikini and went down to the kitchen, collared her stepson. "Swimming lesson, young man. Let's go."

"Do I have to?" The classic plea of the parent-oppressed child.

"Yes, you have to. I promise it'll be a very short but important lesson today. And don't turn on your rap."

She tried to relax on the chaise lounge, knowing he was purposely keeping her waiting while he changed into his swimming trunks. Finally he came out into the darkening afternoon, the lengthening shadows on the bright tiles. She knew he was picking up on something hostile in her gaze.

She dove into the pool, gesturing him to follow. Once he was in the water with her she knew he would be more vulnerable to what she had to say.

"Okay, make it fast," he said, once he was treading water next to her. "What do we do first?"

"We tell the truth. You admit you took those photos of me and gave one to Gino Benedetti."

He didn't answer, tried to paddle away, but she grabbed him by a

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slippery arm. He turned his head, but wouldn't face her.

"Admit it, Toby. If not now, then tonight, when I accuse you in front of your father."

Now the boy's head swiveled defiantly to look at her. He laughed. "Dad? He'd never believe you. He said you're just a gold-digging bitch who married him for his money and his power to make you a big-deal movie star. And you cheat with other guys. Get lost, Megan."

For a moment her words wouldn't come. Then: "Your father loves me. He would never say hurtful things like that."

"He did! He said he never should've divorced Mom. Biggest mistake of his life. So don't go tell him your lies. I never took any pictures of you. And the one I told you Scott saw?" Laughing, having the time of his life now: "He said you're just an anorexic bitch, old lady floppy jugs, a real turnoff—"

Her hands closed on his wet shoulders. He tried to shrug them away, but her anger thrived on their potato-chip flabbiness. "Go on," she said, her voice incredibly even. "Tell me more."

"You're a *Playboy* reject. Look in the mirror, bitch. You're laughable. You really lost that movie because you can't act! That's what Dad says!" He laughed again, his hands almost playfully trying to claw hers away. "You got a smell comes off the screen! Don't you know that? You stink! You'll never make it!"

There was no strength in his soft, Big Mac arms. It was easy to hold his head under water, his words just a gurgle now, the frantic pleas trapped in the pitiful air bubbles escaping from his almost-closed, hate-filled mouth.

When she went back in the house she found herself surprisingly calm. Already she had her story: She had left him there practicing his breast stroke and when he had overexerted himself he had called for help, but unfortunately no one heard. She was sure she had been careful enough to leave no marks on his shoulders.

Arnold was devastated. The police told him accidents happen when children are left unsupervised. Megan tearfully accepted the blame, and her husband's pathetic anger, but she knew she was home free. All their friends came over to commiserate that night and Arnold drank himself into a tearful oblivion.

It was almost a day and a half later when the police returned.

They showed her a vivid, graphic photo of her drowning Toby in the pool.

It immediately metastasized into a major media event, with Arnold refusing to pay her bail. And Gino Benedetti, her nemesis, from his elm-tree vantage point, had finally realized his dream . . . the cover of *People* magazine. ●

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BLOG BYTES

by Bill Crider

The Internet is always changing. New blogs come along every day, while blogs that I've been reading faithfully disappear. Reader's Almanac is a case in point. I touted it last issue, and now it's history, though Bill Peschel promises that something else will appear in its place, maybe by the time you read this. Stop by **http://www.planetpeschel.com** and check if you're so inclined.

Jochem Van Der Steen is a Dutch writer (*White Knight Syndrome*) who often writes in English. He maintains the Sons of Spade blog (**http://sonsofspade.blogspot.com**), which is devoted to "spotlighting the fictional P.I." The site features mostly reviews of private-eye novels and interviews with their authors, including people like Dave White and Shamus winner Andy Straka. If you like P.I. fiction, you'll want to be sure to bookmark this site.

James Reasoner's not Dutch, but he knows his P.I. fiction, being the author of the legendary *Texas Wind*. He's also the author of *Dust Devils*, a superb crime novel that recently received a starred review in *Publisher's Weekly*. Reasoner has published hundreds of Westerns under many names, including his own. The most recent is *Death Head Crossing*. He's published dozens of short stories, too. His engaging Rough Edges blog (**http://jamesreasoner.blogspot.com**) gives monthly updates on his writing progress and has regular reviews of the books he's read and movies he's seen. These aren't always mystery-related, but they're always well worth your time.

The Lady Killers don't really kill ladies. They're women who kill people in their books, and The Lady Killers is the name of their group blog (**http://theladykillers.typepad.com**). Their own names are Jane Finnis, Cara Black, Rhys Bowen, Mary Anna Evans, and Lyn Hamilton, and variety is the name of their game. Evans and Hamilton write archaeological mysteries, but Hamilton's have various exotic settings while Evans writes about the American South. Black's novels are set in Paris. Bowen's historicals are set in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century, and her contemporary mysteries are set in Wales. Finnis's series is set in Roman Britain. So you can imagine the entertaining assortment of topics they discuss in their blog entries. There's always something new.

Detectives Beyond Borders (**http://detectivesbeyondborders.blogspot.com**) is maintained by Peter Rozovsky, a Philadelphia copyeditor who has a great interest in mystery novels by writers from other countries. If you're a fan of "Passport to Crime," you're certain to be interested in Rozovsky's comments on writers like Gianni Mura, Fred Vargas, and Jean-Claude Izzo, among others. ●

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The First Husband

by Joyce Carol Oates

1.

It began innocently: He was searching for his wife's passport.

The Chases were planning their first trip to Italy together. To celebrate their tenth anniversary.

Leonard's own much-worn passport was exactly where he always kept it, but Valerie's less frequently used passport didn't appear to be with it so Leonard looked through drawers designated as hers, bureau drawers, desk drawers, the single shallow drawer of the cherrywood table in a corner of their bedroom which Valerie sometimes used as a desk, and there, in a manila folder, with a facsimile of her birth certificate and other documents, he found the passport. And pushed to the back of the drawer, a packet of photographs held together with a frayed rubber band.

Polaroids. Judging by their slightly faded colors, old Polaroids.

Leonard shuffled through the photographs, like cards. He was staring at a young couple: Valerie and a man whom Leonard didn't recognize. Here was Valerie astonishingly young, and more beautiful than Leonard had ever known her. Her hair was coppery-red and fell in a cascade to her bare shoulders, she was wearing a red bikini top, white shorts. The darkly handsome young man close beside her had slung a tanned arm around her shoulders in a playful intimate gesture, a gesture of blatant sexual possession. Very likely, this man was Valerie's first husband, whom Leonard had never met. The young lovers were photographed seated at a white wrought-iron table in an outdoor cafe, or on the balcony of a hotel room. In several photos, you could see in the near distance a curving stretch of wide, white sand, a glimpse of aqua water. Beyond

Joyce Carol Oates's most recent book (Harcourt, August 2007) is *The Museum of Dr. Moses: Tales of Mystery and Suspense*. The collection received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly*, which said, "Powerful narratives, a singular imagination, and exquisite prose make this a collection to relish." Three of the volume's ten stories previously appeared in *EQMM*. Ms. Oates's latest novel is *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (Ecco). †

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the couple on the terrace were royal court palm trees, crimson bougainvillea like flame. The sky was a vivid tropical blue. The five or six photographs must have been taken by a third party, a waiter or hotel employee perhaps. Leonard stared, transfixed.

The first husband. Here was the first husband. Yardman?—was that the name? Leonard felt a stab of sexual jealousy. Not wanting to think *But I am the second husband.*

On the reverse of one of the Polaroids, in Valerie's handwriting, was *Oliver & Val, Key West, December 1985.*

Oliver. This was Yardman's first name, Leonard vaguely remembered now. In 1985, Val had been twenty-two, nearly half her lifetime ago, and she hadn't yet married Oliver Yardman, but would be marrying him in another year. At this time they were very possibly new lovers, this trip to Key West had been a kind of honeymoon. Such sensual, unabashed happiness in the lovers' faces! Leonard was sure that Valerie had told him she hadn't kept any photographs of her first husband.

"The least we can do with our mistakes," Valerie had said, with a droll downturn of her mouth, "is not keep a record of them."

Leonard, who'd met Valerie when she was thirty-one, several years after her divorce from Yardman, had been allowed to think that the first husband had been older than Valerie, not very attractive and not very interesting. Valerie claimed that she'd married "too young" and their divorce just five years later had been "amicable" for they had no children and had not shared much of a past. Yardman's work had been with a family-owned business in a Denver suburb, "dull, money-grubbing work." Valerie, who'd grown up in Rye, Connecticut, had not liked Colorado and spoke of that part of the country, and of that phase of her life, with an expression of distaste.

Yet here was glaring evidence that Valerie had been very happy with Oliver Yardman in December 1985. Clearly Yardman was no more than a few years older than Valerie and, far from being unattractive, Yardman was extremely attractive: dark, avid eyes, sharply defined features, something sulky and petulant about the mouth, the mouth of a spoiled child; the kind of child a woman might wish to spoil to see that mouth curve upward in pleasure. There was a revealing Polaroid in which Yardman pulled Valerie playfully toward him, a hand gripping her shoulder and the other hand beneath the table, very likely gripping her thigh. His hair was dark, thick, damply touseled. Faint stubble showed on his jaws. He wore a white T-shirt that fitted his muscled, solid torso tightly, and what appeared to be swimming trunks; his legs were thickly muscled, covered in dark hairs. He was barefoot, his toes curling upward in delight. So this was Oliver Yardman: the first husband. Not at all the man Valerie had suggested to Leonard.

He'd thought it was strange, but attributed it to Valerie's natural

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reticence, that in the early months of their relationship Valerie had rarely asked Leonard about his past. She hadn't even asked him if he had been married, Leonard had volunteered the information: No.

And no children, either. He'd been careful about that.

It had been something of a relief to meet a woman without a trace of sexual jealousy. Now Leonard saw that Valerie hadn't wanted to be questioned about her own sexual past.

Leonard stared at the Polaroids. He supposed he should simply laugh and replace them in the drawer where he'd found them, taking care not to snap the frayed rubber band, for certainly he wasn't the kind of man to riffle through his wife's private things. Nor was he the kind of man who is prone to jealousy.

Of all the ignoble emotions, jealousy had to be the worst! And envy.

And yet: He brought the photos closer to the window, where a faint November sun glowered behind banks of clouds above the Hudson River, seeing how the table at which the young couple sat was crowded with glasses, a bottle of (red, dark) wine that appeared to be nearly depleted, napkins crumpled onto dirtied plates like discarded clothing. A ring on Valerie's left hand, silver studs glittering in her earlobes that looked flushed, rosy. In several of the photos, Valerie was clutching at her energetic young lover as he was clutching at her, in playful possessiveness. You could see that Valerie was giddy from wine, and love. Here was an amorous couple who'd wakened late after a night of love, this heavy lunch with wine would be their first meal of the day; very likely, they'd return to bed, collapsing in one another's arms for an afternoon siesta. In the most blatant photo, Valerie lay sprawled against Yardman, glossy coppery hair spilling across his chest, one of her arms around his waist and the other part hidden beneath the table, her hand very likely in Yardman's lap. In Yardman's groin. Valerie, who now disliked vulgarity, who stiffened if Leonard swore and claimed to hate "overly explicit" films, had been provocatively touching Yardman in the very presence of the third party with the camera. Her little-girl mock-innocent expression was familiar to Leonard: *Not me! Not me! I'm not a naughty girl, not me!*

Leonard stared, his heart beat in resentment. Here was a Valerie he hadn't known: mouth swollen from being kissed, and from kissing; young, full breasts straining against the red fabric of the bikini top and in the crescent of shadowy flesh between her breasts something coin-sized gleaming like oily sweat; her skin suffused with a warm, sensual radiance. Leonard understood that this young woman must be contained within the other, the elder who was his wife: as a secret, rapturous memory, inaccessible to him, the merely second husband.

Leonard was forty-five. Young for his age, but that age wasn't young.

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When he'd been the age of Yardman in the photos, early or mid twenties, he hadn't been young like Yardman, either. Painful to concede, but it was so.

If he, Leonard Chase, had approached the young woman in the photos, if he'd managed to enter Valerie's life in 1985, Valerie would not have given him a second glance. Not as a man. Not as a sexual partner. He knew this.

After lunch, the young couple would return to their hotel room and draw the blinds. Laughing and kissing, stumbling, like drunken dancers. They were naked together, beautiful smooth bodies coiled together, greedily kissing, caressing, thrusting together with the abandon of copulating animals. He saw them sprawled on the bed that would be a large jangly brass bed, and the room dimly lit, a fan turning indolently overhead, through slats in the blinds a glimpse of tropical sky, the graceful curve of a palm tree, a patch of bougainvillea moistly crimson as a woman's mouth. . . . Leonard felt an unwelcome sexual stirring, in his groin.

"She lied. That's the insult."

Misrepresenting the first husband, the first marriage. Why?

Leonard knew why: Yardman had been Valerie's first serious love. Yardman was the standard of masculine sexuality in Valerie's life. *No love like your first.* Was this so? (In Leonard's case also, probably it was. But Leonard's first love had not been a sexual love and his memory of the girl, the older sister of a school friend, had long since faded.) The cache of Polaroids was Valerie's secret, a link to her private, erotic life.

Hurriedly he replaced the Polaroids in the drawer. The frayed rubber band had snapped, Leonard took no notice. He went away shaken, devastated. He thought, *I've never existed for her. It has all been a farce.*

In Salthill Landing on the Hudson River. Twenty miles north of New York City. In one of the old stone houses overlooking the river: "historic"— "landmark." Expensive.

Early that evening as Valerie was preparing one of her gourmet meals in the kitchen there was Leonard leaning in the doorway, a drink in hand. Asking, "D'you ever hear of him, Val? What was his name, 'Yardman' . . ." casually as one who has only been struck by a wayward thought, and Valerie, frowning at a recipe, murmured no, but in so distracted a way Leonard wasn't sure that she'd heard, so he asked again, "D'you ever hear of Yardman? Or from him?" and now Valerie glanced over at Leonard with a faint, perplexed smile, "Yardman? No," and Leonard said, "Really? Never? In all these years?" and Valerie said, "In all these years, darling, no."

Valerie was peering at a recipe in a large, sumptuously illustrated cookbook propped up on a counter, pages clipped open. The cookbook was *Caribbean Kitchen,* an expensive book that had been a

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Christmas gift from friends in Salthill Landing with whom the Chases often dined, both in their homes and in selected restaurants in Manhattan. Valerie was preparing flank steak, to be marinated and stuffed with sausage, hard-boiled eggs, and vegetables, an ambitious meal that would involve an elaborate marinade, and a yet more elaborate stuffing, and at this moment involved the almost surgical "butterflying" of the blood-oozing slab of meat. This was a meal Valerie hoped to prepare for a dinner party later in the month; she was determined to perfect it. A coincidence, Leonard thought, that only a few hours after he'd discovered the secret cache of Polaroids, Valerie was preparing an exotic Caribbean meal of the kind she might have first sampled in Key West with the first husband twenty years ago, but Leonard, who was a reasonable man, a tax lawyer who specialized in litigation in federal appellate courts, knew it could only be a coincidence.

Asking, in a tone of mild inquiry, "What was Yardman's first name, Val?—I don't think you ever mentioned it," and Valerie said, with an impatient little laugh, having taken up a steak knife to cut the meat horizontally, "What does it matter what the name is?" Leonard noted that, though he'd said *was,* Valerie had said *is.* The first husband was present to her, no time had passed. Leonard recalled an ominous remark of Freud's that, in the unconscious, all time is present-tense and so what has come to dwell most powerfully in the unconscious is felt to be immortal, unkillable. Valerie added, as if in rebuke, "Of course I've mentioned his name, Leonard. Only just not in a long time." She was having difficulty with the flank steak, skidding about on the wooden block, so Leonard quickly set down his drink and held it secure, while Valerie, biting her lower lip, pursing her face like Caravaggio's Judith sawing off the head of the wicked king Holofernes, managed to insert the sharp blade, make the necessary incisions, complete the cut so that the meat could now be opened like the pages of a book. As Leonard watched, fascinated, yet with a sensation of revulsion, Valerie then covered the meat with a strip of plastic wrap and pounded at it with a meat mallet, short deft blows to reduce it to a uniform quarter-inch thickness. Leonard winced a little with the blows. He said, "Did he—I mean Yardman—ever remarry?" and Valerie made an impatient gesture to signal that she didn't want to be distracted, not just now. This was important! This was to be their dinner! Carefully she slid the butterflied steak into a large, shallow dish and poured the marinade (sherry vinegar, olive oil, fresh sage, cumin, garlic, salt, and fresh-ground black pepper) over it. Leonard saw that Valerie's face had thickened, since she'd been Oliver Yardman's lover; her body had thickened, gravity was tugging at her breasts, thighs. At the corners of her eyes and mouth were fine white lines and the coppery-red hair had faded, yet still Valerie was a striking woman, a rich man's daughter whose

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sense of her self-worth shone in her eyes, in her lustrous teeth, in her sharp dismissive laughter like the sheen of the expensive kitchen utensils hanging overhead. There was something sensual and languorous in Valerie's face when she concentrated on food, an almost childlike bliss, an air of happy expectation. Leonard thought, *Food is Eros without the risk of heartbreak. Unlike a lover, food will never reject you.*

Leonard asked another time if Yardman had remarried and Valerie said, "How would I know, darling?" in a tone of faint exasperation. Leonard said, "From mutual friends, you might have heard." Valerie carried the steak in a covered dish to the refrigerator, where it would marinate for two hours. They never ate before 8:30 P.M., and sometimes later; it was the custom of their lives together for they'd never had children to necessitate early meals, the routines of a perfunctory American life. Valerie said, "'Mutual friends.'" She laughed sharply. "We don't have any." Again Leonard noted the present tense: *Don't.* "And you've never kept in touch," he said, and Valerie said, "You know we didn't." She was frowning, uneasy. Or maybe she was annoyed. To flare up in anger was a sign of weakness; Valerie hid such weaknesses. A sign of vulnerability and Valerie was not vulnerable. Not any longer.

Leonard said, "Well. That seems rather sad, in a way."

At the sink, which was designed to resemble a deep, old-fashioned kitchen sink of another era, Valerie vigorously washed her hands, stained with watery blood. She washed the ten-inch gleaming knife with the surgically sharpened blade, each of the utensils she'd been using. It was something of a fetish for Valerie, to keep her beautiful kitchen as spotless as she could while working in it. As she took care to remove her beautiful jewelry to set aside as she worked.

On her left hand, Valerie wore the diamond engagement ring and the matching wedding band Leonard had given her. On her right hand, Valerie wore a square-cut emerald in an antique setting, she'd said she'd inherited from her grandmother. Only now did Leonard wonder if the emerald ring wasn't the engagement ring her first husband had given her, which she'd shifted to her right hand after their marriage had ended.

"Sad for who, Leonard? Sad for me? For *you*?"

That night, in their bed. A vast tundra of a bed. As if she'd sensed something in his manner, a subtle shift of tone, a quaver in his voice of withheld hurt, or anger, Valerie turned to him with a smile: "I've been missing you, darling." Her meaning might have been literal, for Leonard had been traveling for his firm lately, working with Atlanta lawyers in preparation for an appeal in the federal court there, but there was another meaning, too. He thought, *She wants to make amends.* Their lovemaking was calm, measured,

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methodical, lasting perhaps eight minutes. It was their custom to make love at night, before sleep, the high-ceilinged bedroom lighted by just a single lamp. There was a fragrance here of the lavender sachets Valerie kept in her bureau drawers. Except for the November wind overhead in the trees, it was very quiet. *Still as the grave,* Leonard thought. He sought his wife's smiling mouth with his mouth but could not find it. Shut his eyes and there suddenly was the brazen coppery-haired girl in the red bikini top waiting for him. Squirming in the darkly handsome young man's arms but glancing at him. Oh! she was a bad girl, look at the bad girl! Her mouth was hungry and sucking as a pike's mouth seeking the young man's mouth, her hand dropped beneath the table top, to burrow in his lap. In his groin. Oh the bad girl!

Leonard had the idea that Valerie's eyes were shut tight, too. Valerie was seeing the young couple, too.

"I found your passport, Valerie. I found these Polaroids, too. Recognize them?"

Spreading them on the table. Better yet, across the bed.

"Only just curious, Val. Why you lied about him."

She would stare, her smile fading. Her fleshy lips would go slack as if, taken wholly unaware, she'd been slapped.

". . . why you continue to lie. All these years."

Of course, Leonard would be laughing. To indicate that he didn't take any of this seriously, why should he? It had happened so long ago, it was *past.*

Except: Maybe "lie" was too strong a word. The rich man's daughter wasn't accustomed to being spoken to in such a way, any more than Leonard was. "Lie" would have the force of a physical blow. "Lie" would cause Valerie to flinch as if she'd been struck and the rich man's daughter would file for divorce at once if she were struck.

Maybe it wasn't a good idea, then. To confront her.

A litigator is a strategist plotting moves. A skilled litigator always knows how his opponent will respond to a move. Like chess, you must foresee the opponent's moves. Each blow can provoke a counter-blow. Valerie was a woman who disliked weakness in men. A woman with a steely will, yet she presented herself as uncertain, even hesitant, socially; she knew the value of seeming vulnerable. Her sexuality had become a matter of will, she delighted in exerting her will, even as she held herself apart, detached. In all public places as in her beautifully furnished home she was perfectly groomed, not a hair of her sleek razor-cut hair out of place. Her voice was calm, modulated. It was a voice that could provoke others to be cutting but was never less than calm itself. Leonard had witnessed Valerie riling her sister, her mother. She had a way of laughing with her eyes, mocking laughter not uttered aloud. She

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was a shrewd judge of others. If Leonard confronted her with the Polaroids, the gesture might backfire on him. She might detect in his voice a quaver of hurt, she might detect in his eyes a pang of male anguish. He was sometimes impotent, to his chagrin. He blamed distractions: the pressure of his work, which remained, even for those of his generation who had not been winnowed out by competition, competitive. The pressure of a man's expectations to "perform." The (literal) pressure of his blood, for which he took blood-pressure pills twice daily. And his back, that ached sometimes mysteriously, he'd attribute to tennis, golf. In fact, out of nowhere such phantom aches emerged. And so, in the vigorous act of love, Leonard might begin to lose his concentration, his erection. Like his life's blood leaking out of his veins. And Valerie knew, of course she knew, the terrible intimacy of the act precluded any secrets, yet she never commented, never said a word only just held him, her husband of only nine years, her middle-aged flabby-waisted panting and sweating second husband, held him as if to comfort him, as a mother might hold a stricken child, with sympathy, unless it was with pity.

Darling, we won't speak of it. Our secret.

Yet, if Leonard confronted her over the Polaroids that were her cherished sexual secret, she might turn upon him, cruelly. She had that power. She might laugh at him. Valerie's high-pitched mocking laughter like icicles being shattered. She would chide him for looking through her things, what right had he to look through her things, what if she searched through his desk drawers would she discover soft-core porn magazines, ridiculous soft-core videos with titles like *Girls' Night Out, Girls at Play, Sex-Addict Holiday,* she would expose him to their friends at the next Salthill Landing dinner party, dryly she would dissect him like an insect wriggling on a pin, at the very least she might slap the Polaroids out of his hand. How ridiculous he was being, over a trifle. How pitiable.

Leonard shuddered. A rivulet of icy sweat ran down the side of his cheek like a tear.

So, no. He would not confront her. Not just yet. For the fact was, Leonard had the advantage: He knew of Valerie's secret attachment to the first husband, and Valerie had no idea he knew.

Smiling to think: Like a boa constrictor swallowing its living prey paralyzed by terror his secret would encompass Valerie's secret and would, in time, digest it.

The anniversary trip to Italy, scheduled for March, was to be postponed.

"It isn't a practical time after all. My work . . ."

And this was true. The Atlanta case had swerved in an unforeseen and perilous direction. There were obligations in Valerie's life, too. " . . . not a practical time. But, later . . ."

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He saw in her eyes regret, yet also relief.

Doesn't want to be alone with me. Comparing me with him isn't she!

" . . . a reservation for four, at L'Heure Bleu. If we arrive by six, maybe a little before six, we won't have to leave until quarter to eight, Lincoln Center is just across the street. But if you and Harold prefer the Tokyo Pavilion, I know you've been wanting to check it out after the review in the *Times*, and Leonard and I have, too . . ."

In fact, Leonard disliked Japanese food. Hated sushi that was so much raw flesh, uneatable.

This passion for gourmet food, wine! Expensive restaurants!

Where love has gone, he thought bitterly.

Listening to Valerie's maddeningly calm voice as she descended the stairs speaking on a cordless phone to a friend. It was nearly two weeks after he'd discovered the Polaroids, he'd vowed not to look at them again. Yet he was approaching the cherrywood table, pulling open the drawer that stuck a little, groping another time for the packet of Polaroids that seemed to be in exactly the place he'd left it and he cursed his wife for being so careless, for not having taken time to hide her secret more securely.

(*His* small cache of soft-core porn, pulpy magazines, X-rated videos, evidence of a minor, minimal interest in porn and hardly a consuming passion, he'd taken care to secrete away deep in one of the locked drawers of his filing cabinet downstairs amid documents of stultifying dullness pertaining to IRS payments, stock holdings. *His* secret he was sure Valerie would never discover!)

"'Oliver and Val, Key West, December 1985.'"

With what childish pride Valerie had felt the need to identify the lovers!

At a window overlooking a snowy slope to the river and the glowering winter sky he examined the photographs eagerly. He had seen them several times by now and had more or less memorized them and so they were both familiar and yet retained an air of the exotic and treacherous. One of the less faded Polaroids he brought close to his face, that he might squint at the ring worn by the coppery-haired girl—was it the emerald? Valerie was wearing it on her right hand even then, which might only mean that, though Oliver Yardman had given it to her, it hadn't yet acquired the status of an engagement ring. In another photo, Leonard discovered what he'd somehow overlooked, the faintest suggestion of a bruise on Valerie's neck, or a shadow that very much resembled a bruise. And Oliver Yardman's smooth-skinned face wasn't really so smooth, in fact it looked coarse in certain of the photos. And that smug, petulant mouth, the fleshy lips, Leonard would have liked to smash with his fist. And there was Yardman wriggling his stubby yet long

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toes, wasn't there a correlation between the size of a man's toes and the size of . . .

Hurriedly Leonard shoved the Polaroids into the drawer and fled the room.

"The time for children is past."

Years ago. Should have known the woman hadn't loved him if she had not wanted children with him.

". . . a kind of madness has come over parents, today. Not just the expense: private schools, private tutors, college. Therapists! But you must subordinate your life to your children. My husband—" Valerie's voice dipped, this was a hypothetical, it was Leonard to whom she spoke so earnestly, "would be working in the city five days a week and wouldn't be home until evening and—can you see me as a 'soccer mom' driving children to—wherever! Living through it all again and this time knowing what's to come, my God it would be so *raw.*"

Valerie laughed, there was fear in her eyes.

Leonard was astonished, this poised, beautiful woman was speaking so intimately to him! Of course he comforted her, gripping her cold hands. Kissed her hair where she'd leaned toward him, trembling.

"Valerie, of course. I feel the same way."

He did! In that instant, Leonard did.

They'd been introduced by mutual friends. Leonard was a highly paid litigator attached to the legal department of the most distinguished architectural firm in New York City, its headquarters in lower Manhattan on Rector Street. Leonard's specialty was tax law and within that specialty he prepared and argued cases in federal appeals courts. He was one of a team. There were enormous penalties for missteps, sometimes in the hundreds of millions of dollars. And there were enormous rewards when things went well.

"A litigator goes for the jugular."

Valerie wasn't one to flatter, you could see. Her admiration was sincere.

Leonard had laughed, blushing with pleasure. In his heart thinking he was one in a frantic swarm of piranha fish and not the swiftest, most deadly, or even, at thirty-four, as he'd been at the time, among the youngest.

The poised, beautiful young woman was Valerie Fairfax. Her maiden name: crisp, clear, Anglo, unambiguous. (Not a hint of "Yardman.") At CitiBank headquarters in Manhattan, Valerie had the title of Vice-president of Human Resources. How serious she was about her work! She wore Armani suits in subdued tones: oatmeal, powder-gray, charcoal. She wore pencil-thin skirts and she wore trousers with sharp creases. She wore trim little jackets with slightly padded shoulders. Her hair was stylishly razor-cut to

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frame her face, to suggest delicacy where there was in fact solidity. Her fragrance was discreet, faintly astringent. Her handshake was firm and yet, in certain circumstances, yielding. She displayed little interest in speaking of the past though she spoke animatedly on a variety of subjects. She thought well of herself and wished to think well of Leonard and so had a way of making Leonard more interesting to himself, more mysterious.

The first full night they spent together, in the apartment on East 79th Street where Leonard was living at the time, a flush of excitement had come into Valerie's face as, after several glasses of wine, she confessed how at CitiBank she was the vice-president of her department elected to firing people because she was so good at it.

"I never let sentiment interfere with my sense of justice. It's in my genes, I think."

Now, you didn't say *fired.* You said *downsized.*

You might say *dismissed, terminated.* You might say, of vanished colleagues, *gone.*

Leonard typed into his laptop a private message to himself: Not me. Not this season. They can't!

Another time, in fact many times, he'd typed *Yardman* into his computer. (At the office, not at home. He and Valerie shared a computer at home. Leonard knew that, in cyberspace, nothing is ever erased though it might be subsequently regretted and so at home he never typed into the computer anything he might not wish his wife to discover in some ghost-remnant way.) Hundreds of citations for *Yardman* but none for *Oliver Yardman* so far.

He meant to keep looking.

". . . first husband."

Like an abscessed tooth secretly rotting in his jaw.

In his office on the twenty-ninth floor at Rector Street. On the 7:10 A.M. Amtrak into Penn Station and on the 6:55 P.M. Amtrak out of Penn Station returning to Salthill Landing. In the interstices of his relations with others: colleagues, clients, fellow commuters, social acquaintances, friends. In the cracks of a densely scheduled life the obsession with Oliver Yardman grew the way the hardiest weeds will flourish in soil scarcely hospitable to plant life.

Sure he knows. Knows of me: second husband. What he must remember! Of her.

Had to wonder how often Valerie glanced through the Polaroids in the desk drawer. How frequently, even when they'd been newly lovers, she'd shut her eyes to summon back the first husband, the sulky, spoiled mouth, the brazen hands, the hard stiff penis thrumming with blood that would never flag, even as she was breathless and panting in Leonard's arms declaring she loved *him.*

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Since the discovery weeks ago in November he'd looked for other photos. Not in the photo album Valerie maintained with seeming sincerity and wifely pride but in Valerie's drawers, closets. In the most remote regions of the large house where things were stored away in boxes. Shrewdly thinking that because he hadn't found anything did not mean that there was nothing to be found.

"Len Chase!"

A bright female voice, a Salthill Landing neighbor leaning over his seat. (Where was he? On the Amtrak? Headed home? Judging by the murky haze above the river, early evening, had to be headed home.) Leonard's laptop was opened before him and his fingers were poised over the flat keyboard but he'd been staring out the window for some minutes without moving. ". . . thought that was you, Len, and how is Valerie? Haven't seen you since, has it been Christmas, or . . ."

Leonard smiled politely at the woman. His opened laptop, his document bag and overcoat in the seat beside him, these were clear signals he didn't want to be interrupted, which the woman surely knew, but had come to an age when she'd decided not to see such signals, in cheerful denial of their meaning *Please leave me alone, you are not of interest to me, not as a woman, not as an individual, you are nothing but a minor annoyance.* Melanie Roberts was Valerie's age, and her frosted hair was razor-cut in Valerie's style. Very likely Melanie was a rich man's daughter as well as a rich man's wife but the advantage she'd held as a younger woman had mysteriously faded, even so. Melanie seemed to think that her neighbor Leonard Chase might wish to know that she'd had lunch with friends in the city and gone to see the Rauschenberg exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum and then she'd dropped by to visit her niece at Barnard. Melanie was watching Leonard with sparkly expectant eyes in which dwelled some uneasiness, a fear of seeing in Leonard's face exactly what he was thinking. He had to concede, he saw in Melanie Roberts's face that he might still be perceived as an attractive man, in his seated position he appeared moderately tall, with a head of moderately thick hair, graying, but attractively graying; his skin tone was slightly sallow, but perhaps that was just the flickering Amtrak lighting; his face was dented in odd places, and loosely jowly in others; his nostrils looked enlarged, like pits opening into his skull; his eyes behind wire-rimmed bifocal glasses were shadowed and smudged; yet he would seem to this yearning woman more attractive than paunchy near-bald Sam Roberts, as others' spouses invariably seem more attractive, since more mysterious, than our own. For intimacy is the enemy of romance. The dailyness of marriage is the enemy of immortality. Who would wish to be immortal, if it's a matter of reliving just the past week?

Melanie Roberts's smile was fading. Amid her chatter, Leonard

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must have interrupted. ". . . hear you, Len? It's so noisy in this . . ."

The car was swaying drunkenly. The lights flickered. With a nervous laugh Melanie gripped the back of the seat to steady herself. Another eight minutes to Salthill Landing, why was the woman hanging over his seat! He yearned to be touched, his numbed body caressed in love, so desperately he yearned for this touch that would be the awakening from a curse, but he shrank from intimacy with this woman who was his neighbor in Salthill Landing. On his opened laptop screen was a column of e-mail messages he hadn't answered, in fact hadn't read, as he hadn't for most of that day returned phone messages, for a terrible gravity pulled his mind elsewhere. *The first husband. You cannot be first.* Melanie was saying brightly that she would call Valerie and maybe this weekend they could go out together to dinner, that new seafood restaurant in Nyack everyone has been talking about, and Leonard laughed, with a nod toward the window beside his seat where some distance below the oily-dark sprawl of the Hudson River was lapsing into dusk, "Ever think, Melanie, that river is like a gigantic boa constrictor? It's like time, eventually to swallow and digest us all?"

Melanie laughed sharply as if not hearing this, or hearing enough to know that she didn't really want to hear more of it. Promising she'd tell Sam hello from him, and she'd call Valerie very soon, with a faint, forced smile lurching away somewhere behind Leonard Chase to her seat.

He would track down the first husband, he would erase the man from consciousness. He would erase the man's memory in which his own wife existed. Except he was a civilized human being, a decent human being, except he feared being apprehended and punished, that was what he would do.

Early November when he'd discovered the Key West photos. Late February when his CEO called him into his office in the "tower."

The meeting was brief. One or two others had been taken to lunch first, which had not been a good idea; Leonard was grateful to be spared lunch. Through a roaring in his ears he heard. Watched the man's piranha mouth. Steely eyes through bifocal glasses like his own.

Downsized. Stock options. Severance pay. Any questions?

He had no legal grounds to object. Possibly he had moral grounds but wouldn't contest it. He knew the company's financial situation. Since 9/11, they'd been in a tailspin. These were facts you might read in the *Wall Street Journal*. Then came the terrible blow, unexpected, at least Leonard believed it to be unexpected, the ruling in Atlanta: A federal court judge upheld a crushing $33 million award to a hotel-chain plaintiff plus $8 million punitive damages. The architectural firm for which he'd worked for the past seven years

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was hard hit. Conceding yes, he understood. Failure was a sickness that burned like fever in the eyes of the afflicted. No disguising that fever, like jaundice-yellow eyes.

Soon to be forty-six. Burnt-out. The battlefield is strewn with burnt-out litigators. His fingers shook, cold as a corpse's, yet he would shake the CEO's hand in parting, he would meet the man's gaze with something like dignity.

He had the use of his office for several more weeks. And the stock options and severance pay were generous. And Valerie wouldn't need to know exactly what had happened, possibly ever.

". . . seem distracted lately, Leonard. I hope it isn't . . ."

They were undressing for bed. That night in their large beautifully furnished bedroom. Gusts of wind rattled the windows, that were leaded windows, inset with wavy glass in mimicry of the old glass that had once been, when the original house had been built in 1791.

". . . anything serious? Your health . . ."

From his corner of the room Leonard called over, in a voice meant to comfort, of course he was fine, his health was fine. Of course.

"Damned wind! It's been like this all day."

Valerie spoke fretfully as if someone were to blame.

Neither had brought up the subject of the trip to Italy in some time. Postponed to March, but no specific plans had been made. The tenth anniversary had come and gone.

In her corner of their bedroom, an alcove with a built-in dresser and closets with mirrors affixed to their doors, Valerie was undressing as, in his corner of the bedroom, a smaller alcove with but a single mirrored door, Leonard was undressing. As if casually Leonard called over to her, "Did you ever love me, Valerie? When you first married me, I mean." Through his mirror Leonard could see just a blurred glimmer of one of Valerie's mirrors. She seemed not to have heard his question. The wind buffeting the house was so very loud. "For a while? In the beginning? Was there a time?" Not knowing if his voice was pleading, or threatening. If, if this woman heard, like the frightened woman on the train she would laugh nervously and wish to escape him.

"Maybe I should murder us both, Valerie. 'Downsize.' It could end very quickly."

He didn't own a gun. Had no access to a gun. Rifle? Could you go into a sporting goods store and buy a rifle? A shotgun? Not a handgun, he knew that was more difficult in New York State. You had to apply for a license, there was a background check, paperwork. The thought made his head ache.

". . . that sound, what is it? I'm frightened."

In her corner of the room Valerie stood very still. How like an avalanche the wind was sounding! There had been warnings over

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the years that the hundred-foot cliff above Salthill Landing might one day collapse after a heavy rainstorm and there had been small landslides from time to time and now it began to sound as if the cliff might be disintegrating, a slide of rock, rubble, uprooted trees rushing toward the house, about to collapse the roof. . . . In his corner of the room Leonard stood as if transfixed, his shirt partly unbuttoned, in his stocking feet, waiting.

They would die together, in the debris. How quickly then, the end would come!

No avalanche, only the wind. Valerie shut the door of her bathroom firmly behind her, Leonard continued undressing and climbed into bed. It was a vast tundra of a bed, with a hard mattress. By morning the terrible wind would subside. Another dawn! Mists on the river, a white wintry sun behind layers of cloud. Another day Leonard Chase would endure with dignity, he was certain.

2.

" 'Dwayne Ducharme,' eh? Welcome to Denver."

There came Mitchell Oliver Yardman to shake Leonard's hand in a crushing grip. He was "Mitch" Yardman, realtor and insurance agent and he appeared to be the only person on duty at Yardman Realty & Insurance this afternoon.

". . . not that thisis Denver, eh? Makeville is what this is here, you wouldn't call it a suburb of anyplace. Used to be a mining town, see. Probably you never heard of Makeville back East, and this kind of scenery, prob'ly you're thinking ain't what you'd expect of the West, eh? Well see, Dwayne Ducharme, like I warned you on the phone: Thisis east Colorado. 'High desert plain.' The Rockies is in the other direction."

Yardman's smile was wide and toothy yet somehow grudging, as if he resented the effort such a smile required. Here was a man who'd been selling real estate for a long time, you could see. Even as he spoke in his grating mock-Western drawl Yardman's shrewd eyes were rapidly appraising his prospective client "Dwayne Ducharme" who'd made an appointment to see small ranch properties within commuting distance of Denver.

So this was Oliver Yardman! Twenty-one years after the Key West idyll, the man had thickened, grown coarser, yet there was the unmistakable sexual swagger, the sulky spoiled-boy mouth.

Yardman was shorter than Leonard had expected, burly and solid-built as a fire hydrant. He had a rucked forehead and a fleshy nose riddled with small broken veins and his breath was meaty, sour. He wore a leathery-looking cowboy hat, an expensive-looking rumpled suede jacket, lime-green shirt with a black string tie looped around his neck, rumpled khakis, badly scuffed leather boots. He seemed impatient, edgy. His hands, that were busily ges-

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ticulating, in twitchy swoops like the gestures of a deranged magician, were noticeably large, with stubby fingers, and on the smallest finger of his left hand he wore a showy gold signet ring with a heraldic crest.

The first husband. Leonard's heart kicked in his chest; he was in the presence of his enemy.

In the office that was hardly more than a storefront, and smelled of stale cigarette smoke, Yardman showed Leonard photographs of "ranch-type" properties within "easy commuting distance" of downtown Denver. In his aggressive, mock-friendly yet grudging voice Yardman kept up a continual banter, peppering Leonard with facts, figures, statistics, punctuating his words with *Eh?* It was a verbal tic of which Yardman seemed unaware or was helpless to control and Leonard steeled himself waiting to hear it, dry-mouthed with apprehension that Yardman was suspicious of him, eyeing him so intimately, ". . . tight schedule, eh? Goin' back tomorrow, you said? Said your firm's 'relocating'? Some kinda computer parts, eh? There's a lot of that in Denver, 'lectronics, 'chips,' theseare boom times for some, eh? Demographics're movin' west, for sure. Population shift. Back East, billion-dollar companies goin' down the toilet, you hear." Yardman laughed heartily, amused by the spectacle of companies going down a toilet.

Leonard said, in Dwayne Ducharme's earnest voice, "Mr. Yardman, I've been very—"

"'Mitch.' Call me 'Mitch,' eh?"

"—'Mitch.' I've been very lucky to be transferred to our Denver branch. My company has been 'downsized,' but—"

"Tell me about it, man! 'Downsize.' 'Cut back.' Ain't that the story of these United States lately, eh?" Yardman was suddenly vehement, incensed. His pronunciation was savage: *Yoo-nited States.*

Leonard said, with an air of stubborn naiveté, "Mr. Yardman, my wife and I think of this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. To 'relocate' to the West from the crowded East. We're Methodist Evangelicals and the church is flourishing in Colorado and we have a twelve-year-old boy dying to raise horses and my wife thinks—"

"That is so interesting, Dwayne Ducharme," Yardman interrupted, with a rude smirk, "—you are one of a new 'pioneer breed' relocating to our 'wide open spaces' and relaxed way of life and lower taxes. Seems to me I have just the property for you: six-acre ranch, four-bedroom house for the growin' family, barn in good repair, creek runs through the property, fences, shade trees, aspens, in kinda a valley where there's deer and antelope to hunt. Just went on the market a few days ago, Dwayne Ducharme, thisis serendip'ty, eh?"

Yardman locked up the office. Pulled down a sign on the front door: CLOSED. When he wasn't facing Leonard, his sulky mouth yet retained its fixed smile.

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Outside, the men had a disagreement: Yardman wanted to drive his prospective client to the ranch, which was approximately sixteen miles away, and Dwayne Ducharme insisted upon driving his rental car. Yardman said, "Why'n hell we need two vehicles, eh? Save gas. Keep each other company. It's the usual procedure, see." Yardman's vehicle was a new-model Suburban with smoke-tinted windows, bumper stickers featuring the American flag, and a dented right rear door. It was both gleaming-black and splattered with mud like coarse lace. Inside, a dog was barking excitedly, throwing itself against the window nearest Leonard and slobbering the glass. "That's Kaspar. Spelled with a 'K.' Bark's worse'n his bite. Kaspar ain't goin' to bite you, Dwayne Ducharme, I guarantee." Yardman slammed the flat of his hand against the window commanding the dog to "settle down." Kaspar was an Airedale, purebred, Yardman said. Damn good breed, but needs discipline. "You buy this pretty li'l property out at Mineral Springs for your family, you'll want a dog. 'Man's best friend' is no bullshit."

But Leonard didn't want to ride with Yardman and Kaspar; Leonard would drive his own car. Yardman stared at him, baffled. Clearly, Yardman was a man not accustomed to being contradicted or thwarted in the smallest matters. He said, barely troubling to disguise his contempt, "Well, Dwayne Ducharme, you do that. You in your li'l Volva, Volvo, Vulva, you do that. Kaspar and me will drive ahead, see you don't get lost."

In a procession of two vehicles they drove through the small town of Makeville in the traffic of early Saturday afternoon, in late March. It was a windy day, tasting of snow. Overhead were massive clouds like galleons. What a relief, to be free of Yardman's overpowering personality! Leonard hadn't slept well the night before, nor the night before that, his nerves were strung tight. In his compact rental car he followed the military-looking black Suburban through blocks of undistinguished storefronts, stucco apartment buildings, taverns, X-rated video stores, opening onto a state highway crowded with the usual fast-food restaurants, discount outlets, gas stations, strip malls. All that seemed to remain of Makeville's mining-town past were The Gold Strike Go-Go, Strike-It-Rich Lounge, Silver Lining Barbecue. Beyond the highway was a mesa landscape of small stunted trees, rocks. To get to Yardman Realty & Insurance at 661 Main Street, Makeville, Leonard had had a forty-minute drive from the Denver airport through a dispiriting clog of traffic and air hazier than the air of Manhattan on most days.

He thought, *Can he guess? Any idea who I am?*

He was excited, edgy. No one knew where Leonard Chase was.

Outside town, where the speed limit was fifty-five miles an hour, Yardman pushed the Suburban toward seventy, leaving Leonard behind. It was to punish him, Leonard knew: Yardman allowed

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other vehicles to come between him and Leonard, then pulled off onto the shoulder of the road to allow Leonard to catch up. In a gesture of genial contempt, Yardman signaled to him, and pulled out onto the highway before him, fast. In the rear window of the Suburban was an American flag. On the rear bumper were stickers: BUSH CHENEY USA. KEEP HONKING, I'M RELOADING.

Yardman's family must have been rich at one time. Yardman had been sent east to college. Though he played the yokel, it was clear that the man was shrewd, calculating. Something had happened in his personal life and in his professional life, possibly a succession of things. He'd had money, but not now. Valerie would never have married Yardman otherwise. Wouldn't have kept the lewd Polaroids for more than two decades.

If he guessed. What?

The Suburban was pulling away again, passing an eighteen-rig truck. Leonard could turn off at any time, drive back to the airport and take a flight back to Chicago. He'd told Valerie that he would be in Chicago for a few days on business and this was true: Leonard had a job interview with a Chicago firm needing a tax litigator with federal court experience. He hadn't told Valerie that he'd been severed from the Rector Street firm and was sure that there could be no way she might know. He'd been commuting into the city five days a week, schedule unaltered. His CEO had seen to it, he'd been treated with courtesy: allowed the use of his office for several weeks while he searched for a new job. Except for one or two unfortunate episodes, he got along well with his old colleagues. Once or twice he showed up unshaven, disheveled, most of the time he seemed unchanged. White cotton shirt, striped tie, dark pinstripe suit. He continued to have his shoes shined in Penn Station. In his office, door shut, he stared out the window. Or clicked through the Internet. So few law firms were interested in him, at forty-six: "downsized." But he'd tracked down Yardman in this way. And the interview in Chicago was genuine. Leonard Chase's impressive resumé, the "strong, supportive" recommendation his CEO had promised, were genuine.

Valerie had ceased touching his arm, his cheek. Valerie had ceased asking in a concerned voice, *Is anything wrong, darling?*

This faint excitement, edginess. He'd been in high-altitude terrain before. Beautiful Aspen, where they'd gone skiing just once. Also Santa Fe. Denver was a mile above sea level and Leonard's breath was coming quickly and shallowly in the wake of Yardman's vehicle. His pulse was fast, elated. He knew that after a day, the sensation of excitement would shift to a dull throbbing pain behind his eyes. But he hoped to be gone from Colorado by then.

Mineral Springs. This part of the area certainly didn't look prosperous. Obviously there were wealthy Denver suburbs and outlying towns but this wasn't one of them. The land continued flat and

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monotonous and its predominant hue was the hue of dried manure. At least, Leonard had expected mountains. In the other direction, Yardman had said with a smirk—but where? The jagged skyline of Denver, behind Leonard, to his right, was lost in a soupy brown haze.

The Suburban turned off onto a potholed road. United Church of Christ in a weathered wood-frame building, a mobile-home park, small asphalt-sided houses set back in scrubby lots in sudden and unexpected proximity to Quail Ridge Acres, a "custom-built"—"luxury home"—housing development sprawling out of sight. There began to be more open land, "ranches" with grazing cattle, horses close beside the road lifting their long heads as Leonard passed by. The sudden beauty of a horse can take your breath away, Leonard had forgotten. He felt a pang of loss, he had no son. No one to move west with him, raise horses in Colorado.

Yardman was turning the Suburban onto a long bumpy lane. Here was the Flying S Ranch. A pair of badly worn steer horns hung crooked on the opened front gate, in greeting. Leonard pulled up behind Yardman and parked. A sensation of acute loneliness and yearning swept over him. *If we could live here! Begin over again!* Except he needed to be younger, and Valerie needed to be a different woman. Here was a possible home: a long flat-roofed wood-and-stucco ranch house with a slapdash charm, needing repair, repainting, new shutters, probably a new roof. You could see a woman's touches: stone urns in the shape of swans flanking the front door, the remains of a rock garden in the front yard. Beyond the house were several outbuildings, a silo. In a shed, a left-behind tractor. Mounds of rotted hay, dried manure. Fences in varying stages of dereliction. Yet, there was a striking view of a sweeping, sloping plain and a hilly terrain—a mesa?—in the distance. Pierced with sunshine the sky was beautiful, a hard, glassy blue behind clouds like gigantic sculpted figures. Leonard saw that, from the rear of the ranch house, you'd have a view of the hills, marred only by what looked like the start of a housing development far to the right. Almost, if you stared straight ahead, you might not notice the intrusion.

As Leonard approached the Suburban, he saw that Yardman was leaning against the side of the vehicle, speaking tersely into a cell phone. His face was a knot of flesh. Kaspar the purebred Airedale was loose, trotting excitedly about, sniffing at the rock garden and lifting his leg. When he sighted Leonard he rushed at him barking frantically and baring his teeth. Yardman shouted, "Back off, Kaspar! Damn dog, *obey!*" When Leonard shrank back, shielding himself with his arms, Yardman scolded him, too: "Kaspar is all damn bark and no bite, din't I tell you? Eh? C'mon, boy. Sit. *Now.*" With a show of reluctance Kaspar obeyed his red-faced master. Leonard hadn't known that Airedales were so large. This one had

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a wiry, coarse tan-and-black coat, a grizzled snout of a muzzle, and moist dark vehement eyes like his master. Yardman shut off the cell phone and tried to arrange his face into a pleasant smile. As he unlocked the front door and led Leonard into the house he said, in his salesman's genial-blustery voice, ". . . churches, eh? You seen 'em? On the way out here? This is strong Christian soil. Earliest settlers. Prots'ant stock. There's a Mormon population, too. Those folks are serious." Yardman sucked his fleshy mouth, considering the Mormons. There was something to be acknowledged about *those folks,* maybe money.

The ranch house looked as if it hadn't been occupied in some time. Leonard, looking about with a vague, polite smile, as a prospective buyer might, halfway wondered if something, a small creature perhaps, had crawled beneath the house and died. Yardman forestalled any question from his client by telling a joke: ". . . punishment for bigamy? Eh? 'Two wives.'" His laughter was loud and meant to be infectious.

Leonard smiled at the thought of Valerie stepping into such a house. Not very likely! The woman's sensitive soul would be bruised in proximity to what Yardman described as the "remodeled" kitchen with the "fantastic view of the hills" and, in the living room, an unexpected spectacle of left-behind furniture: a long, L-shaped sofa in a nubby butterscotch fabric, a large showy glass-topped coffee table with a spiderweb crack in the glass, deep-piled wall-to-wall stained beige carpeting. Two steps down into a family room with a large fireplace and another "fantastic view of the hills" and stamped-cardboard rock walls. Seeing the startled expression on Leonard's face Yardman said with a grim smile, 'Hey sure, a new homeowner might wish to remodel here, some. 'Renovate.' They got their taste, you got yours. Like Einstein said, 'There's no free lunch in the universe.'"

Yardman was standing close to Leonard, as if daring him to object. Leonard said in a voice meant to be quizzical, "'No free lunch in the universe'?—I don't understand, Mr. Yardman."

"Means you get what you pay for, see. What you don't pay for, you don't get. Phil'sphy of life, eh?" Yardman must have been drinking in the Suburban, his breath smelled of whiskey and his words were slightly slurred.

As if to placate the realtor, Leonard said of course he understood, any new property he bought, he'd likely have to put some money into. "All our married lives it's been my wife's and my dream to purchase some land and this is our opportunity. My wife has just inherited a little money, not much but a little," Dwayne Ducharme's voice quavered, in fear this might sound inadvertently boastful, "and we would use this." Such naive enthusiasm drew from Yardman a wary predator smile. Leonard could almost hear the realtor thinking, *Here is a fool, too good to be true.* Yardman mur-

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mured, "Wise, Dwayne Ducharme. Very wise."

Yardman led Leonard into the "master" bedroom where a grotesque pink-toned mirror covered one of the walls and in this mirror, garishly reflected, the men loomed over-large as if magnified. Yardman laughed as if taken by surprise and Leonard looked quickly away, shocked that he'd shaved so carelessly that morning: Graying stubble showed on the left side of his face and there was a moist red nick in the cleft of his chin. His eyes were set in hollows like ill-fitting sockets in a skull and his clothes, a tweed sport coat, a candy-striped shirt, looked rumpled and damp as if he'd been sleeping in them as perhaps he had been, intermittently, on the long flight from New York to Chicago to Denver.

Luckily, the master bedroom had a plate-glass sliding door that Yardman managed to open, and the men stepped quickly out into fresh air. Almost immediately there came rushing at Leonard the frantically barking Airedale who would certainly have bitten him except Yardman intervened. This time he not only shouted at the dog but struck him on the snout, on the head, dragged him away from Leonard by his collar, cursed and kicked him until the dog cowered whimpering at his feet, its stubby tail wagging. "Damn asshole, you blew it. Busted now." Flush-faced, deeply shamed by the dog's behavior, Yardman dragged the whimpering Airedale around the house to the driveway where the Suburban was parked. Leonard pressed his hands over his ears not wanting to hear Yardman's furious cursing and the dog's broken-hearted whimpering as Yardman must have forced him back inside the vehicle, to lock him in. He thought, *That dog is his only friend. He might kill that dog.*

Leonard walked quickly away from the house, as if eager to look at the silo, which was partly collapsed in a sprawl of what looked like fossilized corncobs and mortar, and a barn the size of a three-car garage with a slumping roof and a strong odor of manure and rotted hay, pleasurable in his nostrils. In a manure pile a pitchfork was stuck upright as if someone had abruptly decided that he'd had enough of ranch life and had departed. Leonard felt a thrill of excitement, unless it was a thrill of dread. He had no clear idea why he was here, being shown the derelict Flying S Ranch in Mineral Springs, Colorado. Why he'd sought out "Mitch" Yardman. The first husband Oliver Yardman. If his middle-aged wife cherished erotic memories of this man as he'd been twenty years before, what was that to Leonard? He was staring at his hands, lifted before him, palms up in a gesture of honest bewilderment. He wore gloves, that seemed to steady his hands. He'd been noticing lately, these past several months, his hands sometimes shook.

Just outside the barn, Yardman had paused to make another call on his cell phone. He was leaving a message, his voice low-pitched, threatening and yet seductive. "Hey babe. 'Sme. Where the hell

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areya, babe. Call me. I'm here." He broke the connection, cursing under his breath.

At the rear of the barn, looking out at the hills, Yardman caught up with Leonard. The late-afternoon sky was still vivid with light, massive clouds in oddly vertical sculpted columnar shapes. Leonard was staring at these shapes, flexing his fingers in his leather gloves. Yardman swatted at his shoulder as if they were new friends linked in a common enterprise; his breath smelled of fresh whiskey. "Quite a place, eh? Makes a man dream, eh? 'Big sky country.' That's the West, see. I lived awhile in the East, freakin' hemmed-in. No place for a man. Always wanted a neat li'l ranch like this. Decent life for a man, raise horses, not damn rat-race 'real estate' . . . Any questions for me, Dwayne? Like, is the list price 'negotiable'? Or—"

"Did you always live in Makeville, Mr. Yardman—Mitch?" Dwayne Ducharme had a way of speaking bluntly yet politely. "Just curious!"

Yardman said, tilting his leathery cowboy hat to look his client frankly in the face, "Hell, no. The Yardmans is all over at Littleton. Makeville is just me. And that's tem'pry."

" 'Yardman Realty & Insurance' is a family business, is it?"

"Well, sure. Used to be. Now, just me mostly."

Yardman spoke with an air of vaguely shamed regret. *Burnt out* Leonard was thinking. Yardman's sulky mouth seemed about to admit more, then pursed shut.

"You said you lived in the East, Mitch . . ."

"Not long."

"Ever travel to, well—Florida? Key West?"

Yardman squinted at Leonard, as if trying to decide whether to be bemused or annoyed by him. "Yah, I guess. Long time ago. Why're you askin', friend?"

"It's just, you look familiar. Like someone I saw, might have seen, once, I think it was Key West . . ." Leonard was smiling, a roaring came up in his ears. As, in court, he had sometimes to pause, to get his bearings. "Do you have a family?—I mean, wife, children . . ."

"Man, I know what you mean," Yardman laughed sourly. "Some of us got just as much 'family' as we need, eh? See what I'm sayin'?"

"I'm afraid that I—"

"Means my 'private life' is off-limits, friend."

Yardman laughed. His face crinkled. He swatted Leonard on the shoulder. "Hey, man: just joking. A wife's a wife, eh? Kid's a kid? Been there, done that. Three times, Dwayne Ducharme. 'Three strikes you're out.'"

It was risky for Dwayne Ducharme to say, with a provocative smile, " 'No love like your first.' They say."

" 'No fuck like your first.' But that's debatable."

Now Yardman meant to turn the conversation back to real estate.

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He had another appointment back at the agency that afternoon, he'd have to speed things up here. In his hand was a swath of fact sheets, did Dwayne Ducharme have any questions about this property? Or some others, they could visit right now? " 'Specially about mortgages, int'rest rates. There's where Mitch Yardman can help you."

Leonard said, pointing, "Those hills over there? Is that area being developed? I noticed some new houses, 'Quail Ridge Acres,' on our way here."

Yardman said, shading his eyes, "Seems like there's something going on there, you're right about that. But the rest of the valley through there, and your own sweet little creek running through it, see?—that's in pristine shape."

"But maybe that will be developed too? Is that possible, Mr.—Mitch?"

Yardman sucked his teeth as if this were a serious question to be pondered. He said, "Frankly, Dwayne, I doubt it. What I've heard, it's just that property there. For sure I'd know if there was more development planned. See, there's just six acres in your property here, of how many hundreds the previous owner sold off, land around here in prox'mity to Denver is rising in value, with your six acres you're plenty protected, and the tax situation ain't so stressful. These six acres is a buffer for you and your family, also an investment sure to grow in value, in time. Eh?"

Yardman swatted Leonard's shoulder companionably as he turned to re-enter the barn, to lead his client through the barn and back to the driveway. His patience with Dwayne Ducharme was wearing thin. He'd uttered his last words in a cheery rush like memorized words he had to get through on his way to somewhere better.

The pitchfork was in Leonard's hands. The leather gloves gripped tight. He'd managed to lift the heavy pronged thing out of the manure pile and without a word of warning as Yardman was about to step outside, Leonard came up swiftly behind him and shoved the prongs against his upper back, knocking him forward, off-balance, and as Yardman turned in astonishment, trying to grab hold of the prongs, Leonard shoved the pitchfork a second time, at the man's unprotected throat.

What happened next, Leonard would not clearly recall.

There was Yardman suddenly on his knees, Yardman fallen and flailing on the filthy floor of the barn, straw and dirt floating in swirls of dark blood. Yardman was fighting to live, bleeding badly, trying to scream, whimpering in terror as Leonard stood grim-faced above him positioning the pitchfork to strike again. With the force and weight of his shoulders he drove the prongs, dulled with rust, yet sharp enough still to pierce a man's skin, into Yardman's already lacerated neck, Yardman's jaws, Yardman's uplifted and

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still astonished face. A few feet away the leathery cowboy hat lay, thrown clear.

Leonard stood over him furious, panting. His words were choked and incoherent: "Now you know. Know what it's like. Murderer! *You.*"

Emerging then from the barn, staggering. For he was very tired now. He'd last slept—couldn't remember. Except jolting and unsatisfying sleep on the plane. And if he called home, the phone would ring in the empty house in Salthill Landing and if he called Valerie's cell phone there would be no answer, not even a ring.

In the driveway, he stopped dead. There was the Suburban parked where Yardman had left it, the Airedale at the rear window barking hysterically. The heavy pitchfork was still in his hands, he'd known there was more to be done. His hands ached, throbbed as if the bones had cracked and very likely some of the bones in his hands had cracked, but he had no choice, there was more to be done for Yardman's dog was a witness, Yardman's dog would identify him. Cautiously he approached the Suburban. The Airedale was furious, frantic. Leonard managed to open one of the rear doors, called to the dog in Yardman's way, commanding, cajoling, but the vehicle was built so high off the ground it was difficult to lean inside, almost impossible to maneuver the clumsy pitchfork, to stab at the dog. Leonard glanced down at himself, saw in horror that his trouser legs were splattered with blood. His shoes, his socks! The maddened dog was smelling blood. *His master's blood. He knows.* Something was pounding violently inside Leonard's ribcage. Had to think clearly: had to overcome the faintness gathering in his brain. Calling "Kaspar! Come here!" but the wily dog scrambled into the front seat. Awkwardly Leonard climbed into the rear of the vehicle, tried to position the pitchfork to strike at the dog, thrusting the implement but catching only the back of the leather seat in the prongs as the furious barking seemed to grow even louder. Leaning over the front seat trying to lunge at the dog, cursing the dog as Yardman had cursed the dog half-sobbing in frustration, rage, despair as somehow, in an instant, the dog managed to sink his teeth into Leonard's wrist and Leonard cried out in surprise and pain and hurriedly climbed out of the Suburban dragging the pitchfork with him. In the driveway that seemed to be tilting beneath him he stared confounded at his torn and bleeding flesh, that throbbed with pain—a dog bite? Had someone's dog attacked him?

Glanced up to see a pickup approaching on the bumpy lane. A man wearing a cowboy hat in the driver's seat, a woman beside him. Their quizzical smiles had turned into stares, as they took in the pitchfork in Leonard's hands. A man's voice called, "Mister? You in need of help?" ●

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One of Our Barbarians

by Simon Levack

Tlatelolco marketplace: the greatest bazaar in the world. A vast space, big enough for sixty thousand buyers, sellers, porters, slaves, overseers, idlers, policemen, and thieves. You can get anything here. Here, each in its own quarter of the market, you can find gold, jewels, and the finest cotton, and every rich food from turkey and venison to delicate sweetmeats made of amaranth dough. Other dealers peddle less attractive wares—edible scum scraped from the surface of the lake; medicines made of ground lizards and urine.

A solicitor, Simon Levack worked for the Bar Council in the U.K. before his first novel, *Demon of the Air*, won the CWC's Debut Dagger Award in 2000. Since then, he has produced three more novels in the series of 16th-century Aztec mysteries, all featuring the hero of this story, Yaotl. The latest novel in the series is *Tribute of Death*. Look for the next Yaotl short story in March/April. ¶

My business that day was among the featherworkers, who sold their precious, delicate wares from a section of the marketplace next to the jewellers. As a slave to one of the most prominent dealers in feathers, I was often here. On this occasion I had a routine message to carry, an errand that would have taken me moments if I had not been recognised by one of the market police.

"Yaotl! There you are! We need your help!"

I cursed inwardly. My reputation for being able to solve problems often led to trouble. Still, I could scarcely pretend not to have heard. The call must have been audible halfway across the city, and I knew the speaker: a hulking former warrior named Hailstone.

I turned to see the familiar bearlike figure shambling towards me, his cloak and the tassels of his breechcloth flapping as he tried to run. But my attention was caught by the man with him.

Hailstone's companion was small, shorter than I, and bony, with a lean, pinched face. His hair was cut short. He wore a brief cape, open at the front, with holes for his arms. Gold tassels hung from the ends of his breechcloth, green stones glittered in his lips, nose, and ears, and white heron feathers adorned his hair.

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Among Aztecs, you could guess a man's occupation by his appearance, and I could see at once that this man must be an envoy, representing some great lord or ruler. The gold, jewels, and feathers showed that he or his master must be rich, but it was the cape that clinched it: Only diplomats wore those.

"This is Owl," Hailstone informed me. "He has a problem."

"Did somebody give him short measure?" I asked, not really believing it. The penalty for cheating customers was death. It happened. Nobody was ever caught at it twice.

"It's serious!" the little man whimpered. "If I don't find him quickly, I'll die! So will many others! The emperor will be so angry!" His forehead was glistening with sweat and his eyes bulged.

I looked at Hailstone in alarm. "What's he talking about? Who's he lost?"

"A Huaxtec."

"A barbarian?"

"They're a delegation from Tuchpa," Owl stammered. "I was sh-showing them around the city when one of them disappeared! And if they're not all there in time for their audience with Emperor Montezuma this afternoon, I'll be fed to the coyotes and jaguars in the zoo!"

I frowned at Hailstone. "Well, this is very distressing, but what's it got to do with us? I'm sure he'll turn up, anyway."

The policeman growled: "Use your head, Yaotl. He's a barbarian. Can't speak a word of Nahuatl, none of them can, apparently. How long will he last among all the pimps and thieves in this place? Do you want to get caught in the middle of a diplomatic incident? Because I don't!" Our emperor was not known for his patience, and there was no telling what might happen if he were disappointed. "We've got every man out looking for him now. But I saw you and thought you might have some fresh ideas."

"I suppose you've talked to his companions?"

"Tried to. All they speak is babble. Can you see if you can get any more sense out of them? We've got them waiting by the main gateway."

"I can interpret," Owl said hastily.

We found the Huaxtecs standing by the colonnaded wall of the marketplace, close to the main entrance. They were craning their necks to gaze up at the great pyramid of Tlatelolco, uttering admiring noises, as well they might. There was no loftier or more imposing structure in Mexico. Many of their compatriots would have met their deaths on the sacrificial stones at its summit.

Huaxtecs live in the warm lowlands to the east, away from the frost and bitter cold that afflict the Aztecs in the highlands. They are famous for their licentious habits, and not bothering with much in the way of clothing. I could not resist a prurient glance.

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However, although their cloaks were garishly coloured and their heads were crowned by the ridiculous conical caps they favour, their loins were discreetly covered by embroidered breechcloths. They glittered with jewellery, but it was cheap stuff. The lowlands are poor in gold.

The envoy began babbling at them. They babbled back excitedly.

I called out: "Are you sure they don't speak any Nahuatl?"

"Not a word," Owl assured me.

"Well, in that case, ask these barbarian halfwits where they last saw their companion."

There was more babble, and much waving of arms and bobbing of heads. Eventually Owl turned to me helplessly. "Nobody seems to be able to remember."

"Typical," Hailstone grunted. "Can't keep anything in their heads for more than two heartbeats. No wonder we conquered them!"

I spoke to Owl again. "Try asking where they've been in the marketplace. What goods they've seen on sale."

A chorus of babbles ensued. It was like the noise rising from the lake when you throw a stone into a flock of wildfowl. When it had settled down Owl said: "All over. I think they've seen everything. Slaves, building materials, maize, beans, flowers, chillies, hot tortillas, cold tortillas, live dogs, cotton, leather, rubber, obsidian knives, copper axes, soap-tree root, chewing gum, paper . . ."

"Heard all this already," Hailstone confided. "We've got men searching everywhere, asking all the stallholders. Except the featherworkers and jewellers, of course."

I frowned. "Why of course?"

"Owl told me earlier that was the one place they *hadn't* been."

"But you found me among the featherworkers."

"Well, yes, but he said he was just running about, looking for someone to help. Didn't even know where he was, he said."

The envoy babbled away at his outlandish charges. I wondered why such gaudily dressed characters would have avoided the most expensive part of the marketplace, usually irresistible to tourists, with their insatiable appetite for valuable and easily portable souvenirs.

"What are you going to ask them next?" Hailstone prompted.

"Nothing." I began walking briskly away. "I'm going to check on something first."

From behind me I heard Owl ask: "Where's he going?"

The featherworkers' and jewellers' quarter was in uproar. It looked as though a gale had swept through it, blowing down awnings, plucking reed mats from the ground, scattering the traders' wares to the four directions. The merchants themselves stood, ran about, or lay on the ground, arguing, screaming, or

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weeping. Nobody appeared to be in charge, and of the police there was no sign.

"Where are they?" someone jabbered at me as I stood trying to take in the scene. "Where are they when we need them? Running about looking for some feckless barbarian while a gang of kids comes through and ransacks the place!"

I sighed. "You'll find the police are everywhere but here."

At that moment Hailstone stumbled into sight, gasping from the exertion of running all the way from the main entrance. "Yaotl! You'll never guess what happened . . ."

"Bet I can," I said.

"No, but that envoy—the moment I told him where you'd gone, he suddenly turns to those foreigners . . ."

I grinned. "And says something like this, I suppose, in fluent Nahuatl: 'They're on to us, lads! Time to run for it!'"

He stared at me. "How'd you know?"

"It's a gift," I said dryly. "You'd better get your men together. I think the merchants could use some help cleaning up. Not to mention an explanation of why you were all running after some nonexistent barbarian, on the word of a fake envoy, instead of guarding their property!" ●

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NEIGHBOR LAMOUR

by John Goulet

My friend Eugene and I remembered when Lamour moved into the three-bedroom ranch across the street fifteen years ago—sharp red car, tailored suits. Eugene remembered a BMW, but I said Jaguar. Big parties that would go late into the night and clog up Pinecrest Lane. We knew he was a lawyer. Office in downtown Milwaukee. A *trial* lawyer, we heard, with various connections, some of them shady. Fortyish back then, maybe five years older than Eugene and I. Friendly enough to wave, say hello.

We used to kid that if we ever murdered anyone, we'd know who to call on to defend us.

John Goulet is a short-story writer and author of the novels *Oh's Profit* (William Morrow) and *Yvette in America* (University of Colorado Press). His work has been reviewed in *The New York Times, The New Yorker,* and the *London Times Literary Supplement.* A recent review in *Sewanee Review* placed *Yvette in America* in the ranks of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio.* The following story is Mr. Goulet's *EQMM* debut. †

A year after he'd moved in, we weren't exactly surprised to see Lamour's name listed for the defense in the Albert Coniglio murder trial. Coniglio was high up in the Milwaukee mob, and the news of the trial was splashed across the front of the *Express.* For a while, black limos glided in and out of Lamour's driveway. A touch of sleazy glamour on Pinecrest Lane, which apart from Lamour was L.L. Bean chinos, Weber grills, and Packers bumper stickers.

The stupid little war between Lamours and O'Dells that started around then didn't have anything to do with Harry being involved with the mob. No, it was his kid, Junior, who started it by pulling up my mailbox—it was on a post out by the road, like all the Pinecrest Lane boxes. The morning I found it lying on the ground, I went across the street. The kid was whittling on a stick in his backyard. He was about fourteen then, skinny as a dagger, with poured-resin hair, and eyes too big for his head. "Junior, I don't know for sure who pulled up our mailbox, but I think it's you. If it happens again, you're going to be in trouble."

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My friend Eugene worried a little about it. That night we took our wives to the movies. Afterwards, he pulled me aside. "Are you forgetting our neighbor's connections?" he asked me, only half kidding.

Well, I didn't think Milwaukee's gangland was going to put out a contract on a music teacher at a small Catholic college because he'd objected to Harry Lamour's son tearing down his mailbox.

Of course, neither did I think that Harry Lamour's son would, over the next few years, make a hobby of pulling out my mailbox. Each time, I'd call the cops. The cops would come and examine my mailbox, and walk across the street to talk to the Lamours, and make the rounds of the neighborhood looking for witnesses. Fat chance someone was going to volunteer to testify against a family with mob connections. And I didn't have any *physical* proof, of course.

Lamour Senior cornered me in my garage one day and demanded that I get off his son's back. "My boy can be a little impulsive, but bringing in the cops just makes things worse."

"If he keeps it up, I'll catch him at it," I said. And I told him to get off my property.

By that time the friendly waves and neighborly *Hi*'s had already come to an end; the war had begun. Eventually, it would go beyond mailboxes—*way beyond.*

After the next time, I sank the post in cement.

Tire tracks on my lawn—Junior had his license by now—told the story of his subsequent attack. He'd looped a chain between his back bumper and my mailbox and pulled the whole thing out, cement and all. It was complicated enough that I was pretty sure he had help from his father. That they'd formed a team.

My solution, after the cops had performed their useless ritual: *more cement.*

Team Lamour's response: enough firecrackers loaded into the box to send aluminum shrapnel fifty yards.

Soon after, the birch tree out in front was toilet-papered, and a few months later the amusing expression I AM AN ASSHOLE! was printed in big block letters on my garage door.

More cops, even a little local news coverage, more "lack of proof."

I don't want to give the impression that the war was nonstop. It wasn't. Junior's last semester in high school, he was too busy banging a cute little brunette to worry about his across-the-street neighbors. And when he started commuting to the community college in the next county, that slowed him down. Plus, Senior's life had started to come unraveled. But for a while back then I never knew when I'd find the mail glued to the box, or covered with red paint. Or I'd open the mailbox to find it full of dried dog shit. Nails sprinkled on the driveway. Garbage cans tipped over, the garbage spilled out onto the lawn. Newspapers gone missing . . .

Margie wanted to move.

"One of these days," I promised her, "I'll catch them."

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"You're crazy," she said.

Then I got serious: I installed one of those remote cameras; motion-sensitive lights; I even wired an alarm to the mailbox. That did it—the dirty tricks stopped. A little later, Junior dropped out of college and disappeared, leaving Pop without an ally to carry on the war. That was about ten years ago. Peace descended on Pinecrest Lane, at least until last year, when Lamour's wife died and Junior came home for the funeral.

My friend Eugene made his living on prostates—enlarged ones, that is. If anyone in town could pare your prostate to a reasonable size without affecting your hard-on, he was your man. More than once I'd heard "he's the best in town" from people who didn't even know Eugene and I were best friends.

Of course, Eugene was careful about his reputation. What's more important for a physician? Lamour Senior must have taken that into account last year when he decided to reopen hostilities. That and the fact that Eugene was my friend, and scamming him would be a way of getting back at me, another stage in our stupid little war.

He decided Dr. Eugene Mead would have an accident.

The "accident" took place on July 3rd, although Eugene and I didn't hear about it until three days later. That's when I opened up my mailbox and found a letter from Harry Lamour. "Dear Mr. O'Dell," it began. "I am very disappointed that neither you nor Dr. Mead chose to respond to my letters of July 4th concerning the automobile accident that occurred at 11:48 P.M. on July 3rd." Lamour went on to describe the accident, which, he claimed, he had witnessed from his bedroom window. Eugene, backing out of my driveway, had supposedly struck Lamour's car, which had been parked at the curb in front of his house.

I looked out the kitchen window over at Lamour's driveway. His car was gone.

"I expected Dr. Mead would stop in order to inspect the damage he caused to my vehicle. When he drove on instead, I expected I would hear from him the next day."

The night of the third, as usual, the Meads and the O'Dells had watched the fireworks at Lake Park. We'd sat at Eugene's low folding table, with a white tablecloth and a vase with a pink rose, and nibbled our way through a hamper full of goodies, including a layered vegetable terrine and salmon mousse on water crackers, and a bottle of Chandon Etoile. Eugene hadn't been tipsy on the way home. The fact is, Eugene's not the type to *ever* get tipsy—except once, apparently, a long time ago.

Anyway, after dropping us off, Eugene had backed down our driveway. And yes, Lamour's car *had* been parked on his side of the street. But if there'd been an accident, I'd have heard something, surely. The crunch of Eugene's back bumper as it struck.

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But I'd heard nothing.

The letter went on to explain that if Lamour didn't hear from Eugene in twelve hours he was going to file a hit-and-run report with the Department of Motor Vehicles.

I had to laugh as I folded up Lamour's letter. The war was to be carried out on a different level now. Goodbye, torn-up mailboxes. Hello, insurance scams. And it wasn't just O'Dells who were targeted, it was enough to be a friend of O'Dells.

When I got ahold of Eugene on the phone, he'd opened *his* Lamour letter.

"You don't remember hitting anything, then?" I asked.

"Of course not."

I said that Margie and I hadn't seen any evidence of an accident—broken glass, that kind of thing.

Eugene said, "That sleazeball thinks he's going to get his car fixed at my expense."

I laughed again. "I think you've been drawn into a war."

"What do you mean?"

I explained.

"You didn't think it was funny when Junior used to pull out your mailbox," Eugene said.

He had me there.

Lamour's luck had been going downhill for years. There was the Albert Coniglio case, which he lost. Then the big parties came to an end. The sharp cars grew less sharp. Then downright modest. Finally, Lamour took the rap for some local mob screwup.

It was Eugene who informed me our neighbor was going to jail. (Eugene keeps on top of things like that.)

It was summer, about seven years ago, and we were sitting around in Eugene's newly landscaped backyard, complete with red-gravel paths snaking past raised beds of spikey crimson salvia. Blood seeped out of the sirloins on the gas grill. Eugene tossed his fancy new corkscrew at me. "Dick, this time, see if you can get the cork to pop out instead of in."

Eugene's sense of humor used to get to my wife. I told her he was just teasing.

"Jail?" I said. "How do you know?"

"Trust me."

He was right, of course. Lamour *did* go to jail. His beater sat in the driveway oozing rust for maybe two years while his wife went about her business in *her* beater. On our evening walks Margie and I would come across little bits of the beaters that had sluiced down the driveway—lacy rosettes of metal, bolts whose threads were only a dim memory, chrome chips, fragments of rubber tubing that reminded me of Eugene's line of work.

We didn't mourn Lamour's fate. Eugene had us out regularly to

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his new summer place on Lake Meewaulin, which was only a half-hour from Pinecrest Lane. Beautiful place, with picture windows on the lake side so the four of us—after a day of fishing or lounging around—could sit sipping a nice Beaujolais, watching the sunset. There were times Margie would complain about Eugene holding forth about his patients and operations and stuff. But what the hell, that was Eugene.

Somewhere in there, Eugene and I took up golf. Despite Margie's complaints about the cost, I got into the Lake Meewaulin Club—actually, it was a provisional membership, based on Eugene's recommendation. The way Eugene explained it was, Lake Meewaulin didn't have anything against music teachers, it was their crummy salaries that was the problem.

I had to laugh.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. When Lamour came back from jail that winter, he looked older, thinner, grayer. Just like you're supposed to, coming out of "the slammer." He dressed in khaki pants and a blue jacket with a nylon fur collar, and he left the house every morning at seven-thirty, and returned at four-thirty.

Eugene had heard that Lamour was in some kind of probationary work program. A halfway house, something like that.

Funny coincidence, Lamour's wife died about a month after he'd gotten home. We saw the van roll up for the body, and then later, in the paper, we read about it. Junior showed up for the funeral. Long-absent Junior, looking like he'd spent some time in institutions himself. We expected him to take off after his mother was in the ground, but he hung around instead. Then spring came around, and every evening he'd come out onto the driveway and practice karate kicks. He wasn't so skinny anymore, but his eyes were still too big for his head.

The day after I picked Lamour's letter out of my mailbox, Eugene and I were sitting in Eugene's new golf cart, waiting for the foursome in front.

Out of the blue, Eugene said, "There's always hormonal treatment." He grabbed an imaginary cleaver from above his head and arranged his imaginary patient and whacked off a pair of you-know-whats, which is what hormonal treatment means to a urologist. "That's what I'd like to do to our neighbor," he said. He raised the cleaver in the air and whacked off at least ten or twelve more of Lamour's testicles while I watched.

"I know what you mean," I said. But it turned out I didn't. Not really.

That evening I got around to showing Lamour's letter to my wife.

She stood beside me and looked out the kitchen window at Lamour's place across the street. I looked at it too. The driveway was still empty—no beaters, red (Senior's) or blue (Junior's). Just a

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big Rorschach oil stain where one or the other was usually parked. Probably it was at some repair shop being revitalized from stem to stern.

"What's Eugene going to do?" she said.

I said he was getting in touch with his insurance agent.

"Why does Lamour *say* he didn't call the police?"

"The idea is that Eugene was drunk, and by not calling the police Lamour saved his ass."

"Blackmail," my wife said, and sort of laughed.

"I think they picked on Eugene because he's our friend."

"You think it's starting up again—the war?"

"Could be."

"But there's no proof," she said.

"Maybe there doesn't need to be."

"What do you mean?"

I told her what I knew about Eugene's accident when he was in his twenties, the girl in the front seat killed. The beer cans spilling out when the cops pulled him out.

"He's worried that will come out."

She looked at me. "How long have you known that?"

"Awhile."

Junior came out a little later in the afternoon in his faded black shorts and beat-up running shoes. He ran through some warmup exercises, then into the kicking, his feet slashing out. I could hear his grunts. He stayed at the top of the driveway, above the oil stains. He stopped for a moment and I thought he'd spotted me. Without taking my eyes from him, I slowly backed up and found the light switch, and turned off the lights. I kept watching him from deep within my kitchen.

For a while my wife watched with me.

"Will we be involved?" she said.

"Maybe," I said. "Written testimony."

She wasn't smiling now. "We should have moved years ago. Next time maybe it won't be our mailbox."

"Maybe it'll be the garage," I said. "Maybe Junior'll pull down the garage."

"I wouldn't put it past him," she said.

A couple of days later Eugene and I were out at the Lake Meewaulin Club again, playing a quick nine after dinner. It had been a cool summer so far, but tonight it was hot, and the mosquitoes were feeding on Eugene, who's one of those pale Nordic types. By the fourth tee, his arms were bloody from where he'd slapped at them. He hit a long drive that spilled into the woods. His mulligan sliced into the next fairway.

I helped him locate the ball in the woods. On the edge of the fairway, he dropped a ball, took out an iron. Addressed the ball even

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more stiffly than usual and took a big gouge out of the turf.

"Not my night," he said, and set his jaw.

The next hole, our drives landed side by side. On the way Eugene said, "I talked to my insurance gal again today."

"And?"

"I said I wasn't aware of hitting him, but maybe I did."

"You didn't hit him, Eugene," I assured him.

"You say that, but you can't be absolutely sure," he said.

"We would have heard something, seen something."

"Why should I worry about saving American Family a couple of thou?"

I'd seen it coming, of course. He was going to cave in order to avoid any trouble.

"She's going to do some more checking around. She'll probably call you."

"Fine."

"It was dark, it was late, we'd had a little wine. Maybe I did crease him."

"You didn't touch him," I said.

I took out a three-iron and knocked the ball on the green—it was the shortest hole on the back nine.

"What's wrong with you, Dick?" Eugene said.

I shrugged.

I knew before Eugene hit the ball it was going into the trap.

For a couple of holes then he wouldn't talk to me. Finally, as we're going up to the ninth green, he said, "If American Family is willing to fix up his beater, so be it."

"I'll tell her what I know," I said.

"Use your head for a change, Dick," he said. "This is little stuff. It happens all the time."

Eugene's insurance agent called the next day; she got me in my office at St. Stephen's. I was talking to a student who was having a hard time controlling her diabetes. She was a lovely redhead with a small red scar on her forehead, and as I talked to Eugene's insurance agent my eye kept wandering to the scar.

The agent was personable enough, and—once I'd answered her questions—fairly free with information she'd managed to collect. Lamour was claiming that his car was totaled; its worth estimated at eighteen hundred dollars.

Her tone of voice made it clear she'd discovered Lamour's criminal record and was convinced the "accident" was a scam.

Half an hour later the phone rang again. It was Eugene, checking on what I'd told his agent. I was on my way out to lunch.

"I said I saw no evidence of an accident."

The other end of the line was silent.

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"What could I say, Eugene? I couldn't lie."

"What did *she* say?"

I thought about the conversation I'd had with his agent. "She said I'd helped her make up her mind."

"If it gets into the paper," Eugene said, "it'll be unpleasant."

"I've got to go," I said.

But Eugene wasn't finished. "I got a call this morning from someone who claimed to be a reporter."

"A reporter investigating a fender-bender?" I said. "I don't believe it."

"Maybe Lamour put him up to it. Maybe he wasn't even a reporter. What do I know?"

I knew where he was going with this, and I was short of time. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this, but I'm not going to lie," I said.

Eugene called back later. He'd gotten ahold of Lamour and arranged a meeting for that night at Lamour's house. He sounded better than he had earlier, but still a little shaky. The shakiness was the side of Eugene that my wife hadn't seen.

"I want you to come," Eugene insisted.

Meeting with Lamour seemed like a crazy idea to me. I asked Eugene what he hoped to accomplish by it. Eugene said he thought Lamour could be persuaded to back off.

"You're going to buy him off," I said.

"Maybe."

I said, "I don't think I can make it."

Around eleven that night, the phone rings. It's Eugene. "I'm sitting in your driveway," he says. "I need to talk to you."

Margie's watching a Julia Child rerun. "Who's calling at this hour?"

I'm lacing my shoes, zipping up my fly. "Don't worry about it, I'll be right back."

The dome light doesn't go on when I climb in Eugene's front seat.

"How'd it go?"

"Terrible."

"How so?"

"Dick, I need your help."

"I'm listening."

"Lamour's dead."

I get a scooped-out, nauseated feeling in my chest.

It takes a couple of minute for the details to come out. "I brought money. He said it wasn't enough."

"Damn," I say. "Dead." I couldn't believe it.

"Dead," Eugene says.

"For two thousand . . . three thousand bucks."

"The son of a bitch pushed me."

"And you?"

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"Pushed back. We were in the kitchen. He hit his head on the edge of the sink."

Eugene says he did everything he could to save the bastard.

Where was Lamour now?

"Lying on his kitchen floor, wrapped in a tarp."

In my mind it's a blue tarp, who knows why. I ask Eugene if anyone saw him, coming or going.

He hesitates. "I don't think so."

"What about Junior?"

"I don't know. Out of town, I hope. Listen, Dick . . ."

"I'm listening."

Eugene laughs, a little weirdly. "I've got a plan. . . ."

"Okay."

He gets into it. He's going to sneak back to Lamour's and clean up—luckily, there hadn't been much blood. Then around two, when everybody on Pinecrest was asleep, I'd come over. Together, we'd throw Lamour into the trunk of Eugene's car and take him to the Meewaulin quarry. "What do you say?"

Suddenly there are lights behind us, and a car pulls up practically on Eugene's back bumper, locking us in. Before Eugene can think to lock the doors, the back door opens and somebody gets in. I twist the rearview mirror to see who.

"Yo, neighbors." It's dark in the backseat, but Junior Lamour's eyes haven't changed. Too big for his face, they have the ability to look sleepy and malevolent at the same time.

I have this ominous feeling that the war between the Lamours and O'Dells has reached its final stage.

Eugene pulls down the door handle, but Junior says, "You don't want to do that."

A phrase like *scared shitless* takes on new meaning at a time like this.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see something dark and shiny pressing against the back of Eugene's neck. In a pinch, it seems, even a karate expert wants to have firepower on his side.

"He wasn't a bad man, my dad," Junior says.

I pull on the passenger-side door handle, and immediately feel something cold against the back of my neck.

"Stay where you are, Mailbox Man."

"I had nothing to do with your father's death," I say.

"Sure, and I never touched your freaking mailboxes."

Eugene looks at me.

I shrug.

"I tried to save your dad," Eugene says. "Believe me, I did everything possible."

"Yeah, after you killed him."

"It was an accident," Eugene says.

"When I blow your freaking brains out that will be an accident."

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The cold object is no longer pressed against my neck.

"He fell . . . he hit his head," Eugene says.

The gun—again focused on Eugene—makes a clicking noise, loud as a cannon in that small space. Cocked, I guess.

"You gain nothing by killing me," Eugene says.

"I gain satisfaction," Junior says. "My dad made mistakes, but you two—all you cared about was your mailbox and snooping and spreading rumors and calling the cops and playing golf. . . . Call yourself neighbors? *Neighbors?*" He starts to laugh.

Right after that the gun goes off, spraying the contents of my friend's head around the interior of the Lexus.

And right after that—although I wasn't aware of it at the time—Junior Lamour, making his escape, hits my mailbox with his back bumper, wiping it out for the last time.

I don't mind admitting it, it takes awhile to recover from losing your best friend.

A year later I still get these ringing sounds in my head, which is a problem for someone in my line of work. My wife jumps a mile every time a truck backfires—she's gained a ton, too. I have bad dreams, take medication. (My therapist says I've got some kind of post-traumatic stress condition.) And of course, since my provisional membership ran out, it's goodbye golf at the Lake Meewaulin Club.

And I've got nobody to sue.

The neighborhood's different now, with Meads and Lamours gone. Junior gone, too, as it turned out, having managed for a few days to avoid capture but not, finally, death (ramming his beater into the back end of a semi full of Chinese imported toys). A guy who's in insurance bought Lamour's place, but only after it had been on the market for six months. Eugene's is still for sale—we don't know where Marie's gone.

The insurance couple seems nice enough, but—as Margie points out—with three kids they're not at the stage of life we are. And maybe we've been snake-bit when it comes to friendship. Fact is, I don't know about friendship. You get close to people—you get *invested* in them. You think you understand them. Spend all that time together—going out to dinner, vacations, et cetera. Trust them entirely. And then after twenty years, they do something crazy. They screw up and they want to involve you in their screw-up. Not that I don't miss Eugene—I do. All the good times we had together. It's just that, well, Margie and I agree, it's going to be a long time before we're able to trust anybody again. I mean, for me—now—the whole concept of having a best friend is, I don't know, *tainted.*

Anyway, Margie wants to move, she says she's had it with Pinecrest Lane, too many bad memories. Not me, I tell her, now that the war between the Lamours and the O'Dells is finally over. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

PETER IN ST. PAUL'S

by Sabina Naber

Translated from the German by Mary Tannert

The tourist bus was coming straight at her. Or was she moving toward it? Think! 280 feet from the ground, dizziness seized Antonia. Think! Don't feel, think! Breath tried desperately to get through her throat. 280 feet down and the few, maybe 150, that were horizontal, that was a^2 times b^2—the CO_2 burned in her chest. Pythagoras. Exactly how many feet away was that damned bus, anyway? Her sweaty hand slipped off the smooth stone wall next to the door, her arms flailed wildly and at the last second made contact with the railing of the spiral staircase behind her that she had climbed to get to the topmost observation platform. The movement was uncontrolled and her hand struck the iron hard; the pain from the blow made fear loose its death grip on her throat. She sucked in air with a whistling noise.

She was the stupidest person on earth.

A small girl pushed past Antonia, squealing with joy, and ran across the platform, which was only a couple of feet wide. She leaned over, leaned right out over the railing! Just like that! She chattered excitedly in some kind of Spanish at a plump woman who was dragging herself, gasping, up the last stairs of the spiral

Sabina Naber began her career in theater, where she worked as an actress and director, and a writer of musicals and song lyrics. In 1996, she began to do some screenwriting as well, and also turned her hand to prose fiction, first with stories for anthologies. Her first novel, *The Namesake*, was published in 2002 and was followed by 2003's *The Circle* and 2005's *The Debutante*. Her story for us received the renowned Friedrich Glauser Prize for best short crime fiction of 2007.

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staircase. Mama was supposed to hurry. But Mama just leaned, smiling benevolently, against the stone wall, fanning herself. Why didn't she do something? Didn't she realize her child was practically looking death in the face? Just then, the little girl bent her head over the balustrade again. Antonia forced herself to the stone doorway and took a step out onto the platform, her hand stretched out to grab the girl's T-shirt and pull her to safety, but as soon as she did, the square in front of St. Paul's Cathedral came rushing at her again. Her mouth formed meaningless signs and the air in her lungs became very scarce. As if acting on its own orders, her other hand closed over the frame of the door opening and pulled the rest of her body away from the waist-high railing back into the protective darkness of the small domed room.

A drop of sweat tickled Antonia's nose. The mother joined her little girl and together they practiced spitting over the balustrade into thin air. Antonia leaned against the banister at the top of the spiral staircase and waited for the blackness in her head to stop whirling.

She was the stupidest person on earth.

The man down in the church wasn't Peter. And he couldn't have been; Peter was dead. She had followed a doppelgänger up to the Golden Gallery. And because of him, because of this chimera, she was risking her life.

She was truly the stupidest person on earth.

The woman in the security guard's uniform had begun to scrutinize her more and more closely. Antonia forced herself to smile vacuously and assume a friendly but slightly bored expression at all the people arriving, panting painfully, at this highest point in St. Paul's. Only a few stayed next to the stone wall of the tower, the rest went and looked curiously over the railing downward. But that wasn't what had begun to make Antonia nervous. Of all those people who'd forced their way past her through the narrow doorway onto the platform, none had come back her way! First it was just a vague feeling that came over her while she was still fighting her panic and just looking down the spiral staircase made her sweat twice as much. But then she confirmed her suspicion by monitoring the movements of a fat man in a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, and the realization fought its way into her consciousness, though it came with such potential for panic that Antonia involuntarily refused to entertain it. The man had been on the platform for twenty minutes already, and that alone wasn't normal. And to top it off, meanwhile at least fifty people had come up after him and gone out onto the Golden Gallery. They couldn't possibly all have fit out there. The only logical explanation was that there was an exit you only reached by going out onto the platform.

Not on your life!

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Antonia's glance flickered around the domed room in the illogical hope of finding a hidden inside exit. She saw nothing but a window with opalescent glass in it; she could see shadows moving past it on the other side. And no one passed the next window. That made things pretty clear. And just exactly what was it, this audacity of an exit? An unprotected exterior staircase, perhaps? A man who'd been blocking about a third of the opalescent window for some time now also seemed to regard the descent as a challenge. Or maybe he was waiting for someone? He wiped his face and lifted a hat or cap that Antonia couldn't see clearly through the window until he turned and stood in silhouette. It was a béret—just like the one a few minutes ago, worn by that man who looked like Peter . . . Was that this man? Was it Peter after all? Was he waiting for her? Without thinking, Antonia took one step toward the platform. The act pulled her out of her visions. Yes, that's what they were, visions, because just at that moment, the man on the other side of the window turned toward the exit and his silhouette disappeared. Antonia forced herself to breathe out. This beret wearer was just a Fata Morgana, a déjà-vu. His old-fashioned beret, unusual for a man these days, had confused her so much that she'd lost her grip on the facts. Because she'd seen Peter's body. Yes. So that man out there could not be her one true love.

Not on your life.

The security guard was mistress of the spiral staircase, a Cerberus between Antonia and the road back to life. Her eyes caught and held Antonia's restless glance. Antonia smiled conspiratorially and, as unconcernedly as she possibly could, whispered, "Exit," and pointed toward the platform. The guard nodded severely. Antonia nodded. Slowly and more often than was necessary. Don't lose your poise now. Cerberus began to swell. She seemed to crowd Antonia, to push her away from the stairs that would rescue her by taking her down, but were only meant for coming up.

So Antonia got up from the cold stone ledge she'd been sitting on and took a small step outside. Two teenagers stormed past her, taking her with them a few inches. Her heart stopped, and then began to race. There! Wasn't that bit of stone giving way under her feet? The floor tilted forward, she could feel it; it tipped toward the edge with an almost lustful speed! Why didn't anyone else notice? But the railing stayed where it was—how could that be?—and came closer and closer. Antonia gripped it and pushed back. But the magnet on the other side of the railing was much stronger, and it sucked at her head. The square in front of the cathedral tilted and began to pump like a huge heart. At the same time, its surface became soft, tempting her to jump. It looked like one of those rescue air-cushions used by the

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fire department. How long would a free fall last? Ten seconds? Twenty? Or just five? Suddenly the picture shook and someone behind her bellowed, "Sorry!" at her neck. Antonia turned around reflexively—the instinctive British "Sorry!" had become such a habit over the last two weeks. The stone wall was solid and the siren call of the railing behind her grew weaker. She grabbed the man, and, using him as a pivot, took one giant leap back into the darkness of the dome.

Not on your life!

Why did her sister have to be sick today of all days? Hypochondriac! Lying around in their hotel room. A sniffle was really no reason to miss all the exciting new things on this trip. And Valentina would have seen that man for what he was—a figment of Antonia's imagination, not in the least like the original. They would have listened in peace to the choir rehearsal, and right now they would probably be sitting somewhere, enjoying a hamburger with those wonderful homemade French fries. Instead, Antonia crouched in a trap set for her at dizzying heights.

But why? Why?

Cerberus looked at Antonia like a predator studies its prey, and then motioned outside. Twilight was dissolving the skyline; the black of the railing softened and blended into the dusky air. Antonia looked at her watch. The cathedral would close in twenty minutes. Shouldn't her life, threatened by such a steep fall, be passing before her eyes? Or would this much-vaunted phenomenon only occur during the final five seconds, when she was eye to eye, so to speak, with the asphalt rushing up to meet her? And what would her unconscious show her then?

Suddenly, Antonia felt a terrible desire for a cigarette. It was a feeling she thought she'd gotten over three years ago. She began to laugh. If she'd only known then that she'd die in a fall from St. Paul's Cathedral, she'd have gone on puffing. She'd have dismissed Peter's health mania with a languid wave of her hand. She'd probably also have gone on smoking if she'd known they only had eighteen more months together. What were a couple of black spots in your lungs compared with a gunshot in the head? None of it had helped, not his obsessive workouts, his abstinence, his vegetarianism, his vitamin candies. Nothing. Coincidence had decided to send him across the path of those hoodlums in the parking garage. And they weren't the least impressed by his flawless face, they'd just shot it all to a bloody clump of flesh. They'd done the job so well that Peter could only be identified by his just as flawless body and the W-shaped scar above his right hip. In just a second or two, those thugs had rendered everything senseless, all their work and dreams, hers and Peter's.

But why? Why?

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It was all part of a giant clown's act. Why, after all, had she insisted on this trip to London, a trip that now spelled her own end? What had she hoped to find here in Peter's hometown? Words of comfort? That was the farthest thing from Scott's mind; she'd seen that in his dulled eyes once he'd finally realized who she was. A loser in the suburbs, come down in the world and with a bad case of acne he would doubtless carry to his retirement. Presuming anyone ever gave him a pension. It hadn't been easy to find him. But she'd finally hunted him down in the eighth pub named "Bloody Mary." It was astonishing how different best friends could be. And it was a little clearer to her now why Peter hadn't invited Scott to their wedding. He must have been ashamed of him. Which threw a shadow across her hero, admittedly: A truly noble man is not ashamed of his friends. Or maybe it was true, what Peter said, that Scott had a fear of strangers so bad that it would cause his acne to swell and smother him if he ever had to leave England. That he really was the living proof of the saying "My home is my castle." At any rate, all her efforts had been for nothing. Scott was one of the tight-lipped of this world—and, to conclude from his darting eyes, he had a big problem with women. Which was neither surprising nor particularly noteworthy.

And why hadn't she listened to Valentina and banished all thought of a visit to Peter's parents? If she'd gone to Cambridge with Valentina instead, she'd have spared herself one of the most painful experiences of her life. Oh yes, it was really helpful, this if-onlying of hers. Because if she hadn't been so frustrated by Scott and her own stupid ideas, she wouldn't have gotten into a drinking match the night before with that pro golfer, and then she wouldn't have been hung over when she met the Clarks. And if she hadn't been hung over, she would have been more quick-witted, would have told the two of them exactly where they could stuff their accusations. Because if she had gone to the parking garage with Peter—against his express wishes, let it be noted—then she'd be dead too. Yes indeed. And if she'd never been born, she wouldn't now be maneuvering herself into a situation with no way out.

But why? Why?

Because none of the therapy had helped. Countless conversations that had served only one purpose: to make sure her therapist could pay the rent. Because yes, Peter's death was her fault. It was her fault. The Clarks were right, dammit, even if they didn't know why. The why had begun hours earlier, before that critical moment when Antonia and Peter had decided to go home separately.

Antonia became aware of a pair of feet in sturdy black shoes, planted in front of her own feet, which she was pressing together. There were legs attached to the feet, legs in gray trousers, of the

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same fabric as the uniform jacket. Cerberus was staring down at her. A short exchange followed: The guard pointed at her watch and held it up for Antonia to see, and Antonia stammered out an answer. Cerberus pointed at the platform and touched Antonia's arm, and Antonia burst into tears. Never. *Niemals. Jamais.* Was there any language at all that would soften the heart of this adversary?

As Antonia wiped the smears of mucus from her face, she saw that her hand had become a claw with bloodless yellow knuckles. All that hanging on for dear life had to be paid for—in blood. Ha! Ha ha. Were the condemned always that funny? A figure wearing a sweet perfume squatted next to her. The figure's high-pitched voice and a third, sonorous voice began to duel with the flat, dead voice of Cerberus. Their bodies swayed back and forth, accommodating the day's last surge of courageous visitors up the stairs. Allegedly, fear of heights diminished in the dark. Antonia did her best to hold on to that thought, but her body resisted, shaking.

Never. Not even in a formless nothing. Because the formlessness was just to fool the eyes. Her head knew better. A^2 plus b^2. A hand pulled her up. For the first time, Antonia looked at her new tormenters. They were even smiling soothingly. What now? "We'll hold on to you?" "We'll push you?" *Just try! I'll take you all over the edge with me!*

The roar in her ears thinned, began to admit other noises. What language did people speak here? She was in England. English. Think, Antonia! Something like "You don't have to" trickled through to her consciousness. Her eyes followed the couple's waving, gesturing arms. They were pointing down the spiral staircase. Antonia's glance sought Cerberus's, who was looking at her with a mixture of condescension and capitulation. Could it be true? Certainty arrived in the form of gentle urging in the direction of the stairs and a swift glance downward by the man to assure himself that the stream of visitors had stopped. The miracle had happened. She would never have to go out onto the platform again.

What madness! She'd spent hours in deathly fear just because of the smug stubbornness of a security guard. *Clack. Clack.* Her heels clattered on the metal steps of the spiral staircase, just like in a comic book. *Clack.* The jerking in her brain had the same noise. What utter madness.

Antonia stepped out onto the wide ring of the Stone Gallery and took a deep breath of the evening air. It was already cooler. The lights of London twinkled in the distance. The view must be impressive, and she could have been enjoying it here, ten feet from the balustrade. But no: Like an idiot she'd had to run after a beret-wearing stranger. Was he French? Antonia giggled, feeling foolish at the way she kept thinking in clichés. The giggling became louder and louder. She held her breath. If she couldn't

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stop, the other tourists here on the Stone Gallery would think she really was crazy. But her mouth stretched against her will, wider and wider, and she laughed uncontrollably. An elderly lady coming around a corner stared at her indignantly. Antonia waved her arms in a paroxysm of excuses. The elderly lady appeared to understand her; at least, she smiled reassuringly. Then Antonia understood. The woman was one of the last visitors to the Golden Gallery; she'd witnessed Antonia's hysteria. The embarrassment of this recognition choked off the laughter. Antonia moved away from the woman, using her flight to inspect the other side of the gallery. On that side was also the door to the exit—to an interior flight of stairs!—because the helpful couple had just come down and was giving her a friendly wave. They tried to start a sensible conversation with her, but Antonia nipped that abruptly in the bud with a cold nod and an even colder smile.

What madness.

She'd made an utter fool of herself over a couple of yards of concrete. She couldn't let that happen anymore. And she had to get over her obsession with Peter, too. From now on, she'd look at London through her own eyes, not through Peter's. She straightened her head, and her eyes fell to the floor across from the stairs. Suddenly, everything began to swim. Slowly she dropped, shaking, into a crouch, and put her fists against her eyes, pressing away the tears. The paper from the vitamin candy was green, and the writing on it was familiar. Antonia's hand trembled its way over to the scrap of paper, the second hand followed the first, and together they smoothed out the paper. It was the same writing. Yes. Really. From the company that made the vitamin candies Peter always ate.

A flood of tears burst from Antonia's eyes and then stopped just as suddenly as it had started. At the same time, she felt the cold and the trembling creep into her limbs. Still crouching, she began to rock back and forth. Before the roar in her ears crowded out everything else, she heard a woman explain to a man that the figure squatting over there probably first had to get over the shock caused by her fear of heights. The woman spoke German. Tourists. Think, Antonia. There were only tourists here, nothing but tourists. No ex-husbands all shot to pieces. Think. It was a syllogism. Peter was a fan of vitamin candies wrapped in green paper. The vitamin candies came from England. She was in England. So it was nothing more than—indeed, it was almost certainly—coincidence to find green vitamin-candy wrappers in England on the floor of the Stone Gallery in St. Paul's Cathedral. It was only logical. Period.

Antonia forced her knees to stretch. Felt her way to the protruding base of the stone wall. Using her arms for support and taking what seemed like an eternity, she managed to sit down on it. It was just a candy wrapper, of a sort sold all over England. Nothing else. Nothing more, nothing less. Something utterly, completely

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normal. But what about the man in the beret? The same blond hair? The figure? The way he walked? The duffle coat? The clump of flesh for a face. The scar. The waiting shadow. His knowledge of her fear of heights. The man's nonexistence? His funeral. His parents' grief. Falling into nothing?

Breath got stuck in her chest, couldn't find its way out. And her heart thudded in her neck, the echo ringing in her ears. Roaring. Taking off. Think, Antonia! Look at yourself. Breathe. Think!

This was madness. A clear sign of clinical insanity. She shouldn't have quit her therapy, because it definitely wasn't healthy to be seeing ghosts everywhere. Ha, ha. Antonia's fingers fumbled for her mobile phone, pressed the speed-dial button for Valentina. It rang only twice, and then the voice of her sister dispelled the hammering noise of her own heart. Antonia's report on the last few hours came out disjointedly, but her sister understood even the words Antonia didn't say. She responded with a "Mmmph!", a familiar, annoyed snort. Antonia felt the world enclose her, take her up in its midst again. And then came the sentences that broke up the frozen brittleness in her body, word for word: Saw body. Funeral. Valentina herself saw body. Just imagination. Silly thing. Other mothers have "wonderful" sons, too. Berets "in" again. And if not, then logically and probably Peter not the only freak on earth. Valentina loves Antonia. Even if she is going around the bend. Laughter. Hugs. Valentina feeling better. Hungry. Antonia come home, time for pub. Nothing but a stupid trauma.

Or madness. Antonia wasn't sure what she ought to think of herself as she hung up. At any rate, she was back in the Here and Now. She got up in almost childish anticipation of the remainder of the descent.

Amazing. The Whispering Gallery. In her rush to the top, she'd completely overlooked it. Antonia looked around her, saw no security guards. Which was logical if you consider that genuine tourists go all the way up, which is to say keep strictly to the order in which you're supposed to tour the points of interest in the cathedral. First the Whispering Gallery, then the Stone Gallery, then the Golden Gallery. And then down and out to the next tourist attraction. Based on that approach, Antonia had missed a stop on her tourist itinerary. She looked around again and stepped out onto the empty Whispering Gallery, where allegedly a word whispered on this side of the gallery would reach the ear of a listener on the other side, across the cathedral, with complete clarity.

Amazing. Sweat poured from every pore even though the distance to the railing was at least a yard and she hadn't even looked over it. But she felt it. Just ninety-nine feet, that's what it said in the guidebook. Antonia pressed herself back onto the stone bench. She'd give anything to feel Peter's hand in hers. Hear his reassuring

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murmur that he would carry her, Superman-style, across every abyss. Peter. He'd loved teetering on the edge of a sheer drop. The police had made that much clear to her. If he hadn't died at the hands of those thugs, he'd have shuffled off his mortal coil in the thin air of his high-flying business deals, that's what they meant. It hadn't comforted her to hear that, it had been more of an illuminating shock. His stock deals had been nothing more than hide-and-seek. Insider trading and a few other tricks had contributed to soiling his image. She hadn't wanted to believe it, even after all those months of therapy. She'd found excuse after excuse for him. He'd been blackmailed, he'd been naive. But never guilty.

Antonia ran her hand across the stone of the bench rubbed smooth by billions of visitors. Her new insights felt smooth like that. There was no way to evade them anymore. She'd been blinded by love like a teenager. The thought relieved her mind, because in a strange way it excused her as well. Peter had been her first love. She'd had sex before, and what people generally referred to as "relationships." But love, she'd only found that with Peter. He'd been her God. Antonia laughed. The sound died away, nothing came back to her. Would it work if she giggled quietly against the wall, her hand held in front of her mouth? Abruptly the giddy feeling dissipated and gave way to strange sentences and images that came into her mind. There was something negative and important about them, but Antonia couldn't pin them down. Never mind.

Amazing. An experience as mean as her fear of heights had brought her to this insight. And when she looked at it like that, Peter's death wasn't her fault. Yes, the fight they'd had was bound to happen, but it could just as easily have happened any other time, given the foundation of their relationship. It was all the same whether she'd spoken of her desire for children that day or any other day. He would always have reacted the same way, because he would always have had problems with his illegal business deals. He would always have gotten angry, and she would always have responded by bursting into tears. And they would have sworn eternal enmity, as they always did. And in time he might have gotten into another nasty situation, probably one that had more to do with his business. Oh yes. And when you looked at it that way, his death at the hands of those thugs was merely justice served a little early. But why justice, why did she think of it as justice? Because the images rose up, unbidden, that's why.

The color green. A bloodbath. A dead mobile phone. Arriving home late. Green.

That strange raid on the nightclub around eighteen months ago. It had been green candy wrappers and his image in that blurry newspaper photo, but she'd buried that fact deep inside her, so deep that she hadn't known it anymore. Amazing, the admission

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didn't hurt at all. Yes, admission—because those vitamin candies might be common in England, but they weren't in Austria. Who was he, really, the man she'd been planning to grow old with?

Antonia sat hunched on the stone bench. Maybe there really were hobgoblins, spirits with a strange sense of humor who thought they knew what was good for us. She had to travel to London and climb to dizzying heights chasing after a stupid and insignificant beret wearer to realize that the great love of her life had been a ridiculous self-deception. At least her fear had been productive. She didn't need any more therapy. She'd probably jerk instinctively the rest of her life every time she saw a green candy wrapper, but that was nothing in comparison with the feeling of seeing Peter around every corner.

Amazing how easy it was.

Antonia looked around. Other than her, there was just one solitary figure on the other side of the gallery. She glanced from a distance down into the cathedral. Visitors were scarce down there, too. She leaned against the wall: The guidebook said you had to whisper behind your hand.

"Peter can kiss my ass."

She smiled, because she knew she was free.

"I've always liked doing that."

Antonia stared, first at the wall, and then at the man across from her, but he was looking out into the air. There was no one else there. She was crazy after all. The hallucinated answer was proof of that. She'd only imagined she was cured. Wished it. She was a nutcase. Yes, he'd always had fun saying the things she knew but didn't want to say. And she'd enjoyed it. Her fantasy, her longing—they'd all played tricks on her. Was that necessary for the healing process, too? Whispering her feelings in public? What would her imagination answer?

"You're the nightclub murderer."

"You're right about that."

Yes, it was her imagination that said this thing she'd never admitted to herself. How liberating. But did it free her from every fear? Antonia leaned forward, peered over the railing down into the depths. It wasn't that far down at all. It wasn't dizzying in the least. What was it about her fear of heights? It was a childish refusal to grow up. Nothing more. That's right. Children live in a fantasy world; adults live in the real world. And reality knows no fear of heights. Antonia leaned on the railing and looked down into the cathedral. Looking downward had a liberating beauty. Exhausted, she fell back onto the stone bench. She'd overcome her worst fear. She'd have to tell Valentina right away. She was free. Yes, she was. Smiling, she leaned toward the wall, held her hand in front of her mouth, and whispered.

"You're dead, Peter."

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She felt the sound wave reproduce itself down the length of the smooth marble wall. What would all the tourists think of that sentence if they could hear it? But they weren't there; they were all being ushered out by the security guards. There was only the one man on the other side, staring into the air. Who pulled something out of his coat pocket. Something soft, that looked to her, standing on the other side, like a hat made of felt. And then he bent toward the wall.

"You're wrong about that, Butterfly."

That name, his pet name for her, drove her to her feet like a jolt of electricity. She looked out across the divide, which dissolved before her eyes into a nothingness that invited panic. She pressed her fists to her eyes, against the tears, and for a fraction of a second her vision cleared and she saw the man unwrap something from a piece of paper. Green rushed across the distance between them. Reflexively she dropped her eyes and the pews began to rush up at her. Or was she rushing at them? The floor of the cathedral tilted and began to pump like a huge heart. At the same time, its surface became soft, tempting her to jump. It looked like one of those rescue air-cushions used by the fire department. How long would the fall last? Ten seconds? Twenty? Or just five? Her eyes registered, only half aware, that the man put the candy into his mouth and pulled on the beret. Peter was alive. And the fall didn't even take two seconds.

Amazing. ●

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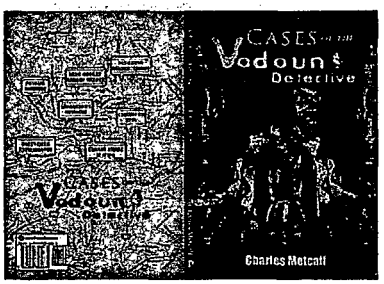

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Art by Mark Evans

The Moorhead House

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The house on the hill had Christmas lights.

I stopped beside my van—white, with DUSTY'S CLEANING lettered in discreet gold. The van was camouflage—official enough, without advertising the kind of work I actually did—but people knew anyway. Hard to miss when the guy down the street offs himself and a woman in a hazard suit, driving a van loaded with cleaning supplies, shows up a few days later.

But that day, I was alone. I was touring a cleaned scene, making sure my team had gotten every last bit. I wore my coveralls, a mask, and three pairs of gloves, but I hadn't gone for the full treatment, thinking it unnecessary.

The neighborhood was solidly Oregon middle-class: old Victorians, 1930s bungalows, a few ranches; late-model cars, all probably bought on time; and lovely yards with only a little grass and lots of perennials. The kind of neighborhood a prospective buyer would look at and think of as a nice place to raise kids, the kind of place you grow old in, where your neighbors watch out for you and keep track of every little thing.

But I'd been here four times in the ten years I'd owned this busi-

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ness—for the Hansen suicide (right in the living room, where the kids couldn't miss it. Bastard); the Palmer home-invasion-gone-wrong (the crime-scene techs had missed the cat, curled up under the stove where it had apparently crawled to nurse its wounds); the well-known Bransted murder (the little girl had been dragged into a nearby garage and gutted there, mercifully after death); and the Moorhead ritual slaughter in the Victorian up the hill.

At least, the authorities believed it was a ritual slaughter. They never did find the bodies, although that place had four different high-velocity spatters, and all sorts of ritualistic items—knives, black candles, destroyed crosses. That was the only case I'd ever been called to testify in, mostly because the members of that cult were convicted even though no one ever found the victims.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch is equally comfortable writing either mystery or science fiction. A former editor-in-chief of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, she has authored many works that belong purely to science fiction. And she is also, under the pseudonym Kris Nelscott, the author of an Edgar-nominated mystery series. Her most recent book, *Recovery Man*, is part of an "interplanetary detective series," and combines her talents in both genres. ¶

The murders had occurred over Christmas.

The first time I'd seen the Moorhead place, it'd been covered with Christmas lights like something out of a Hallmark greeting. All it had needed was two feet of snow, and a few carolers out front holding their lanterns, their red-cheeked faces upturned in wholesome, rapturous praise.

My first partner'd quit after that job. Not that I blamed her. The Moorhead job had left me shaken too, and I'm not the shakeable type. I'm a former firefighter and EMT, one of the first women in the state to do that kind of work, and I've battled both flame and discrimination with equal ferocity. I've seen what people can do to each other, and I've learned to accept it most of the time.

Since then, the Moorhead house had sold more than once, but no one has ever been able to live there long. As far as I knew, the place had been empty for years.

The Christmas lights bothered me.

They were up in the same place those original lights had been, white icicles—popular ten years ago—dripping down like melted frosting off the gables and the eaves of the Queen Anne. So much like that dusky winter afternoon when I'd seen the destruction for the first time.

Back then, I had no clue how to handle the tears that cleaning a drop of blood from the back of a lamp might bring. I tried to pretend

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that I was just cleaning a place, a very filthy place, and I was beginning to realize that would never really work, that you couldn't stop the brain from wondering how it must've felt to be among the screams and the crashing and the glinting knife.

The state waited nearly a month before letting us in. By then, the place smelled like ancient rot and old blood.

That smell came back to me as I stared at those lights, promising a festive afternoon to anyone who would just march up the hill and knock.

"Who's in the Moorhead house?" I asked when I got back to the office. "Office" is too big a word for the place: That makes it sound like we all have desks and secretaries and official nameplates. In reality, I have a tiny office and the rest of the place is two rooms—the front area with a desk, a phone, and a Coke machine that Debbie insisted on, as well as a warehouse-style back room, filled with all manner of cleaning equipment, industrial-strength showers, and five commercial washer and dryer sets.

Marcus sat behind the desk that afternoon. He's a big guy with a deep, reassuring voice, the kind folks like to hear when they've had a death in the family and decide to hire us themselves.

"Seen the lights, huh?" he said, leaning back in his chair and folding his massive hands over his surprisingly flat stomach.

"Yeah." I punched the Coke machine, and a root beer fell out.

We'd long ago bought the cola people out, filled the machine with our favorite cans, and shut off the payment mechanism. Now the thing works like an oversized (and expensive) refrigerator. I don't get rid of it, though, because it's the only nifty part of our office.

"To be honest," I said, popping the top, "it scared me a little."

"Dwayne said that too."

I'd forgotten Dwayne worked the second part of that job—when the first set of new owners somehow got it into their heads that the tiny bones in the septic system belonged to the murdered family. The bones actually belonged to a family of squirrels. But by then, the crime-scene techs had been back to the house and the lawn dug up. The mess was incredible, and the crime-scene people decided to call us.

Not that it mattered to the first new owners. They sold as soon as the place was presentable again.

"How come that job weirded you out?" Marcus asked.

I shrugged, took a sip of the root beer, and said, "Sometimes I wonder why more jobs don't weird me out."

"Nice avoidance," he said. "Now answer."

I smiled at him. "Because there're no bodies."

"There're never any bodies when we go in," he said.

Which wasn't entirely true. There was that cat in the Palmer

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house and farther downtown, a stray dog left on the back porch. One of our other cleaning teams discovered an infant in a back closet, an infant who hadn't been part of the murder that the team had been cleaning up.

But I got Marcus's point. The bodies that we cleaned up after were long gone by the time we got to the house. We always knew what happened—we had to, so that we would know where to look for debris or spatter or pieces of skin—but we almost never saw the corpse.

"I think it would have been easier if there had been bodies." I set the root beer down. "It was the uncertainty."

Or maybe it had been my uncertainty. As an EMT, I'd pulled dying people out of car wrecks. As a firefighter, I'd been at houses where the children didn't get out, where the remaining person on the fifth floor refused to jump, where entire families died in their sleep.

But nothing prepared me for the emptiness of a crime scene. The moved furniture, the ruined rugs, the destroyed curtains. The toys that were pushed against the wall, the broken vases, the shattered lamps.

We couldn't repair that stuff. Our mission was to make sure no one could tell a violent or neglected death had happened in this place. And if the family still lived there, our mission was to make the place look like it had before what we euphemistically called "The Event."

But the Moorhead house was the first place I worked without a family to move back in or without an owner overseeing the job we did on the rental property.

No family left, no extended family leaving messages on my machine, no potential owners waiting to rebuild the place according to their new vision.

I tried not to look at the Moorhead house as I drove to my next job. It wasn't far away—another suicide, damn the holiday season—and from the back door of a kitchen that hadn't been cleaned since 1978, I could see the lights of the Moorhead house against the rain-darkened sky.

I tried to ignore it, to concentrate on the life lost, the loneliness that seemed to be the cause. This man hadn't been found for nearly two weeks, which put his death on Thanksgiving Day. The remains of a small turkey and the store-bought pumpkin pie confirmed that.

He had family—an estranged wife who hadn't seen him in nearly thirty years, two children now grown, and parents who sounded genuinely hurt when they hired us over the phone.

I'd learned, though, that genuine hurt sometimes sounded brusque or businesslike, not thick with tears. And I wondered about a man whose house was so dirty that the neighbors didn't

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complain about the odor because they were used to odors coming from the place.

I never told my coworkers that I thought about the dead as if I were the last person who would remember them. Sometimes, perhaps, I was. Certainly the family of that man wouldn't know how bleak his life was at the end. Even if one of us told them, they wouldn't be able to imagine the piled-up papers, the half-written letters, the battered but comfortable chair in front of the TV.

I recognized this house because it was a filthy version of my own.

My place is spotless. Because my hours are long and my moods uncertain, I don't keep a pet. I have the battered but comfortable single chair in front of a too-big television, only it's in my basement, not the center of the living room.

If someone asked me, I'd never admit to being lonely.

Usually I don't mind.

Except on difficult days, when I'm cleaning out someone else's solitary home.

The invitation came two days later. The city's annual bash, held for the contractors and private firms that kept the city running, was always a big deal. The planners spared no expense. Once they rented a yacht to follow the old ferry route across the river. Another time, they commandeered the largest, trendiest nightclub in the city. And one time—the only time (because too many people complained)—they held a beautiful secular service at the city's historic Presbyterian church.

This year, however. This year's site was a stunner.

Debbie handed me the invite not three minutes after the mail arrived. I was sitting in my office, enjoying a rare moment of quiet. I had that week's checks spread in front of me. I was thinking about the bank deposit, and having a healthy bank balance at the Christmas holidays for the first time since I'd opened the business.

"Boss," Debbie said.

I looked up. Her normally dusky skin had paled to an abnormal gray color. She held the invitation between her thumb and forefinger as if it smelled bad.

It didn't look bad. In fact, I recognized it. We usually didn't get formal invitations here, not the kind with the gold foil borders and the calligraphic writing.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She handed it to me. It was on a stiff cardboard stock that felt like expensive parchment. I glanced at the language, familiar after ten years of parties.

"The annual party," I said. "So?"

"Look where they're holding it."

I did. And felt the blood leave my face as well.

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The Moorhead house.

"Get me the envelope," I said.

She went back to reception. I could see her through my door, rummaging through the wastebasket. When she finally found the envelope, she carried it back to me in the same way she had carried the invite itself—thumb and forefinger, as if the entire thing would infect her.

I took the envelope from her. It was made of a matching stock and had a metered city-hall postmark from the day before. If someone had sent this as a joke, they would have had to duplicate the card stock and use the city-hall postage meter, which gets guarded like crazy so that city-hall employees don't use it for personal letters.

"Crap," I said, and reached for the phone.

I dialed the RSVP number at the bottom of the invite. After a few rings, I got the voice mail of a person I didn't know. I hung up and dialed the deputy mayor, Greg Raabe. We had gone to college together. We'd even dated a few times before I had found my calling and before he had met his wife.

His secretary picked up immediately, and when she heard it was me, she put me through even faster.

"Greg," I said without preamble, "what's this about the Christmas party being at the Moorhead house? Do you remember what happened there?"

"I remember," he said, which was not the response I expected. I expected some political dance. The fact that he answered—and sounded disgusted—meant that he had fielded more than one call about this.

"Don't you think this is a little inappropriate?"

"What I think doesn't matter," he said. "It's a done deal."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," he said, "the city bought the building. They plan to turn it into a museum."

That was the thing about the Moorhead house, the thing no one talked about anymore. Shortly after the family died, the National Register of Historic Places placed the house on its registry. Apparently someone had gone through the entire historic-preservation rigmarole in the years before the murders.

Fortunately for me, the certification came after we cleaned the place up. If it had come before, the job would have taken much longer, and the city would have been billed for a great deal more money.

Historic preservation crime-scene cleaning required an entirely different use of chemicals, several kinds of oversight.

I'd managed to overlook most of that and had, in fact, forgotten it, until Greg Raabe had said the word "museum."

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The Moorhead house had been the first home built on this side of the river. The fabulously wealthy Moorheads had made their money in various enterprises in the Oregon territory, from logging to mining to trading supplies. Then they bought up the land surrounding the river, and sold it, piecemeal, to settlers coming down the Oregon Trail.

The Moorheads kept large portions of the land, however, much of it near the river, so that they could control the ferries (the only way to get across and head to Portland, even then the state's major city). The river also gave them added control of the logging industry. In those days, logs floated down the river to be collected at sloughs which were also owned by the Moorheads. Over time, the river land became a center for what little industry the city had, and the rents made the Moorheads even wealthier.

But they became enchanted with their wealth, and wanted a lot more power than owning a single small city would give them. The great-grandsons of the original family moved to Portland, where they bought even grander houses on even grander hills. Their sons became politicians, and their children became drug-addicted deadbeats who had every privilege.

Somewhere along the way, the holdings here got sold. Then the houses in Portland went, and finally, the famous family, now down to an infamous few, had only enough left to maintain their townhouses in Washington, D.C.

The Moorhead house, symbol of the wealth and power of a bygone age, had—even before the federal government decided to protect it—become the symbol of death and destruction in the modern age.

"A museum?" I asked.

"People love a mystery," Greg said in that dryly bland voice, the one I always thought of as his political voice. "And the house is truly historical. The museum will have one room dedicated to the murders, but it'll be upstairs. The rest'll talk about city history, the impact of the Moorheads, and the way that this part of Oregon once seemed like the center of the universe."

Then I knew he was being sarcastic. He never used that phrase in serious conversation.

"Whose idea was this?" I asked.

"You read about it in the papers?" he asked as if that was an answer.

"No," I said.

"Then think about it."

I did, and it only took me a minute to understand. The mayor had done this. The mayor, Louise Vogel, had set herself up as a minor dictator, much to the disgust of everyone outside of her party and even some within.

She had the benefit of being one of the few people in the city

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who would take the job, which paid next to nothing for the amount of work involved. Greg had become deputy mayor as a sort of oversight position, but she had defanged him quickly. She owned much of the council, bought, I was told, with a combination of blood money and blackmail threats. The woman knew how to run small-city politics.

"Why in the world would Louise want the Moorhead house as a museum?" I asked.

"I have no idea," Greg said. "Makes as much sense to me as holding a Christmas party there. So, are you coming?"

"I cleaned the place, Greg," I said softly. "I had to testify at the trial."

"Oh." He was silent for a moment. Then he sighed. "I'm supposed to jolly people into attending."

"Has it been working?"

"So far," he said. "Apparently, people like to pretend they're not interested in death houses, but they really are."

Unless they see the houses in full aftermath.

"I suppose it'll be a grand affair," I said, mimicking his dry voice.

"It'll be memorable, that's for sure," he said, and signed off.

I held onto the phone for a moment longer, mostly to fend off Debbie's questions. As she listened to my conversation, she seemed to have gotten ahold of herself. She shook her head and shifted from foot to foot.

I set the receiver down. "It's no joke."

She swallowed. "Are we going?"

The city's party was always the highlight of our year.

"Greg says the party'll be memorable," I said.

"People will talk about it for a long time," she said.

I adjusted some of the checks in front of me. My pleasure in my unusual wealth at year's end had faded.

"Let's make attendance optional this year," I said. "And before anyone agrees to go, make sure they know that the party'll be at Moorhead house."

"Okay." Debbie started to leave my office, then she paused at the door. "You going?"

"I don't know," I said, and realized, to my surprise, that I had just spoken the truth.

I suppose, politically, I should have said I was going to go. My job, after all, was to make buildings habitable again. Part of habitable was holding festive events—weddings, bar mitzvahs, Christmas parties.

But habitable was different from comfortable. And habitable wasn't always possible.

Places like the Moorhead house were notorious, and notoriety lingered long after the physical examples of the crimes had disappeared.

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In the end, it was my curiosity that took me there. I wanted to see the house in all its glory. I wanted to know if it could still have glory.

And I wanted to know exactly what Louise Vogel was up to this time.

No one else from the office wanted to go. Debbie actually called me ghoulish, even though I wasn't the person holding the party. Dwayne looked at me with pity, asked me if I was sure, and when I said I was, he visibly shuddered. Then he told me, quietly, that he'd never go in that house again, not even if I paid him to do so.

In the end, Marcus went with me, mostly because he was curious. He'd been hired long after I did the first part of the Moorhead house job, but he was there for the tail end of the trial, and for Dwayne's run at the tiny bones in the sewers. Marcus told me he'd always wanted to go inside, and acknowledged that it was an unhealthy curiosity, based as much on the missing bodies as it was on the effect the entire place had had on our office.

He picked me up at eight. I'd forgotten how well he cleaned up. He wore a long jacket over dress pants—a modern suit that harked back to the Old West—and instead of looking like a football player stuffed into his younger brother's clothing, he looked like something out of *GQ*.

I felt dowdy in comparison. I wore a black velvet dress, and I decked it with a red scarf and some glittery (but fake) jewelry I'd inherited from my great-aunt. My matching black velvet heels required, of all things, dusting, and I had to run out an hour before the party to buy panty hose without runs or pulls.

Marcus waited inside my foyer while I dithered over coats and purses, feeling more like a girl-girl than I had for a while. Once upon a time, I had cared about things like makeup and matching purses with shoes, but I had lost that at nineteen when I'd come home from college to find my mother dead of a stroke on the kitchen floor.

She had been there for a week. My parents were divorced—my father lived in another state—and I was an only child. I had come home to surprise my mother, and instead, she had surprised me.

Marcus had a 1960s Mustang that he took out for special occasions, and apparently this ranked as one of those. He drove to the Moorhead house in silence. Normally, we would have chattered the entire way—Marcus and I share the same taste in movies, books, and politics—but those subjects paled in comparison to the house.

The Mustang rode lower than my van, so the view of the Moorhead house as we turned onto the street below seemed even more impressive than usual. This close to Christmas, you'd think other homes on the block would have decorations on the windows or lights strung outside, but the Moorhead house seemed to be the only one with Christmas spirit.

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I looked up at the place as we started toward the drive, and those icicle lights still sent a chill through me. I almost told Marcus to turn around and I'd buy him dinner at a nearby steakhouse so we wouldn't waste the dress-up clothes, but I didn't. I knew better than to seem weak in front of one of my employees.

I'd learned that lesson as a female firefighter. Even when you felt uncomfortable, you took a deep breath and went into the smoke. To do anything less meant you couldn't perform your duties.

And somehow, this party had become one of my duties.

We were arriving deliberately late. I hated showing up early to any party. Marcus pulled the Mustang into the circular drive, and my breath caught.

Some things were different: The hedges had been clipped to the bone and did not have lights hanging from them as they had that murderous Christmas season. Signs had been planted in what had been the yard but was now obviously going to be a garden, warning guests to stay on the paths. The signs had been hand-calligraphed, and looked expensive. They even had little drawings of holly around the edges.

I hated them.

Marcus looked at me as he got out of the Mustang, and then he grinned like a little boy who was about to do something wrong.

"Ready, boss?" he asked.

I'd never be ready, but I smiled gamely and put my hand on his massive arm. He helped me pick my way across the path. The air was cold and damp, but the pine boughs near the house gave off a Christmasy scent that I hadn't expected.

Suddenly I felt younger than I had in years, almost like that girl I'd left in my mother's kitchen, and my heart lifted. A party was just what I needed. If I could forget the house, or at least look on its new role as host as a personal victory, I might be able to have a good time.

We stepped onto the porch together. Inside the frosted glass windows, we could see shapes moving against yellow light.

My stomach clenched, and I swallowed convulsively.

I wasn't sure I could do this.

Marcus gave me a sideways glance. "You okay?"

I nodded because I couldn't answer. He knocked on the door.

Someone pulled it open and the smells of burning wood and baking cookies filled the air. Laughter came along with Mel Tormé's voice, singing about Jack Frost nipping at noses. The man who opened the door had a Santa hat over graying hair. The hat didn't go with his exquisitely tailored suit.

He held a glass clearly filled with eggnog in one hand. With the other, he gestured toward the interior. "Merry, merry!"

"Happy, happy," Marcus said, making fun of him.

But the man didn't seem to notice. He clapped Marcus on the

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back as we walked inside.

The place was transformed. If I hadn't known it was the house in which I'd spent a week cleaning, I wouldn't have recognized it. To my right, the curved staircase was once again the center of the house. Someone had wrapped garlands of holly around the mahogany banister, probably with no thought for how old, how rare, or how valuable the wood was.

People stood on the stairs, holding drinks, talking, some looking at the portraits hung over the stairs, others heading up to see what else the house had in store.

Coats were piled on top of the telephone seat built against the wall. The carpets were gone, revealing wood floors that matched the wood trim throughout the house.

I couldn't imagine what it had cost to clean the floors. I had cleaned the carpets and recommended their removal, but no one had done that—at least not for the first family who bought the place. I had warned the realtors that if anyone took up the carpets, they might find horrible stains beneath. I had removed the rugs myself in the upstairs bedroom where two of the family members had bled to death (there was no saving those rugs, and no attempt to), but the ones down here had had bloody footprints and drag marks, and other stains that I never could quite identify.

"You're staring," Marcus whispered.

At least, I thought he whispered it, although he might have spoken in a normal tone. The party noises going on around us made it hard to hear much more than the rumble of conversation. The music was classy and so were the people around me. Hard to believe most of them spent their days in jeans and overalls or uniforms paid for by the city.

"Sorry," I whispered.

"Is it different?" he asked.

"Yeah."

I led Marcus into what had once been the front parlor. The pocket doors were gone, along with most of the walls that contained them, so now the front and back parlors were one room (with an arch) that modern people would call the living room.

The furniture was fake period, with a fainting couch, a regular couch, and overstuffed armchairs. Too many tables crowded the bay window, and on those tables stood food of all sorts, from cookies and sliced pies to small unidentifiable appetizers and toothpicked bits of fruit and cheese.

Marcus grabbed a small plate, shaking it with surprise. "China."

"Nothing but the best," I muttered, and doubted he could hear me.

I couldn't eat, even if I'd wanted to. I left him there, debating whether to have strawberries dipped in chocolate or chocolate-covered cherry trifles. From a passing waiter carrying a tray of beverages on his outstretched palm, I snatched a flute of cham-

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pagne, carrying it with me as I went from room to room.

The place had clearly been professionally decorated. From the furniture to the draped pine boughs and hanging mistletoe, the interior looked like something out of *House Beautiful.*

The Christmas tree, at the far wall of what had been the back parlor, took up so much space that it seemed to be growing out of the floor. It was decorated in silver bows, tinsel, and little silver lights that blinked on and off. An embarrassing display of packages hid the lower branches.

I knew from previous parties that the packages would be gone by the night's end, a mound of paper left for someone else to clean up, and the gifts would seem less impressive unwrapped than they did at this moment.

A Do-Not-Enter sign had been taped to the swinging kitchen door, the only infelicity in the entire place. I ignored it, and went inside anyway, drawn by the smell of baking cookies. Small women in rented tuxedos, and looking hot, wiped hair away from their faces. Two coaxed a stainless-steel dishwasher to take more dishes. Another woman bent over the stove, and yet another was placing crudités on a silver tray.

Men as tall as the women were small picked up the trays. The men also wore tuxes, but on them, the tuxes looked natural. Maybe because they were in traditional serving roles, where the women, stuck in the kitchen, should have been in simple black dresses with aprons to complete the servant illusion.

"You're not supposed to be here," said the woman filling the trays.

"That's all right," I said. "I used to work here."

One of the men looked at me sharply. He frowned a little, as if wondering how anyone could have worked here, given the history of the house. Or maybe I was reading too much into a slight reaction. Maybe he thought my lame excuse for being in the kitchen was just that. I smiled at him, and slipped out of the way.

The kitchen was dramatically different, remodeled about the time of the bones discovered in the sewer drain. The stove was restaurant quality, the refrigerator one of those stainless-steel sub-zero monstrosities that looked like it could eat an entire room.

Everything was different, and somehow I found that more disconcerting than the Christmas decorations around front. When I had cleaned this place, the kitchen had been my haven—the only room without much blood in the entire house, and that blood only came from the detectives and crime-scene techs. Harmless, innocuous drops, left by people who were trying to solve the crime, not the people who had done it.

My stomach was churning. The smell of food was making me ill. I pushed open the swinging door and stepped back into the living room.

Marcus was talking to a pretty woman in a slinky blue dress.

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Louise was standing near the tree, gesturing at the presents. She looked even thinner than usual, her face bony, her black hair pulled into a tight bun.

Her gaze caught mine, flat and challenging. I lifted my still-full glass in a silent toast. She smiled—a real and warm smile, something I had never seen from her before—and raised her glass as well. We drank in concert from separate parts of the room as if we were old friends.

"I see you've kissed and made up." Greg Raabe, the deputy mayor who had told me about this debacle, had sidled up beside me. He knew how much I disliked Louise, and how that feeling seemed to be mutual.

I turned to him and smiled. He no longer looked like the boy I'd dated in school. That boy had been reedy slender and blond, with no muscles at all. His bright blue eyes had dominated his face.

The eyes remained the same, dominating and filled with personality, but the rest of him had changed. He was as heavy as he had once been slight, and in place of those visible ribs were rock-hard abs from all the weights he lifted. He ate to compensate for the tension, I think, because he didn't drink or smoke, and to compensate for the eating, he exercised.

"There was no kissing," I said to him, happier than I wanted to be to see him. "I just saluted her, that's all. This is quite the party."

"This is quite the expense," he said. "Imagine what the council will say when they see this on the city budget."

I grinned. "Fortunately, that's not my job."

"But it could be mine," he said, looking at Louise talking to the man near the presents. "I was kind of hoping that once she had her stepping-stone to the governorship, I could become mayor."

"One party won't get in the way," I said.

"You're assuming that this party is the only budget item that'll bother them." He sighed and grabbed his own champagne flute from a passing waiter.

I looked up at the waiter as he went by. It was the man who had frowned in the kitchen. He looked familiar. His skin was a ruddy color that wasn't common in the Pacific Northwest, except among people who worked on the ocean. He had a square jaw, and hard cheekbones, the kind I always associated with those 1930s pictures of Aryan youth.

"Know him?" Greg asked.

"He looks familiar," I said as he went into the kitchen. "Does he to you?"

"In a generic waiterly way." Greg smiled. "I told Louise we should have dancing, but she didn't listen to me."

"There's no room," I said. Besides, Greg wouldn't have been able to dance with me even if there had been music. His wife Emma pretended that the fact that we'd dated didn't bother her, when, in

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fact, it was very clear that it did.

I scanned the room, but didn't see her. "Is Emma upstairs?"

The smile left his face. "She wouldn't come."

"Because of the house?" I asked.

"Because of the separation." His voice was low. "She doesn't like my ambitions."

Emma had always wanted Greg to settle down and make money. He had always been more interested in public service than in making monetary use of his expensive law degree. Apparently the fights had come to a head.

"When did you separate?" I asked.

He shushed me and whispered, "Not everyone knows."

"Sorry," I said.

"It happened last week. I have an apartment near City Hall, which I'd had anyway. I guess I knew this was coming."

Everyone had known this was coming, maybe even from the moment the vows were taken. But Greg seemed quietly devastated.

I put my hand on his shoulder, startled to feel the same kind of muscles I had felt on Marcus. "I'm really sorry," I said again.

Greg grinned. The look didn't quite meet his eyes. "No, you're not. You never liked Emma."

Not many of his friends had, and I always figured the ones who had liked her just pretended for Greg's sake.

"I am sorry," I said. "For you. This is hard."

"Yeah," he said, and then sighed. "Duty beckons."

Duty didn't, but Louise did. She was waving him over with a hand so manicured I could see the shine of the nail polish from here. Time for the packages. I hoped they got to my name quickly. I was ready to leave.

Marcus had left his new conquest and came over beside me. "Did you check the upstairs?"

I shook my head. I hadn't forgotten the upstairs, but I didn't see the need to torture myself. "I ducked into the kitchen for a while."

Which reminded me of the waiter, whom I no longer saw. "Did you notice that waiter, the one who looked like he'd been a member of the Hitler Youth?"

"No," Marcus said. "Why?"

Greg had clapped his hands for quiet. I sighed. I knew this drill. First they'd demand silence, then they'd hand out gifts. Louise worked off a list. I had noted last year that the city contractors like me got one of two things: an espresso maker (if the city had spent a lot of money on you) or a care basket filled with all kinds of city products, like salmon and some of our famous cheese and locally grown filberts.

I, of course, had gotten a care basket, even though the city spent a lot of money on our services. I thought that it was merely an oversight, then Greg had reminded me that we weren't listed in

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the budget. We were buried in other line items. So no one really knew how much money we made cleaning up local property except maybe Debbie and me.

Greg started calling out names. The man beside Louise handed out the packages, and Louise kept charge of the list. People walked up, got large gaudily wrapped gifts, and then walked away, grinning.

Marcus rolled his eyes. "How long is this going to take?"

"Usually about an hour," I said. "You want to go back and make goo-goo eyes at that sweet young thing?"

"She's hard to talk to," he said.

"Because?" I asked.

His face shut down. "Because I told her what I do."

That was one of the major drawbacks to our business. People thought we were on the level of gravediggers and morticians. Even the popularity of programs like *CSI,* which made one small aspect of death work glamorous, didn't spill over to us.

"Tough break," I said.

He shrugged. "Anyone with reactions like that's too shallow for me."

But he didn't sound sincere. And then he took my champagne and finished it for me. I watched him drink another, and decided that at some point in the evening I'd have to wrestle the Mustang's keys from him and get us home.

It took two more hours before we could leave. I never did see the waiter again, but I got absorbed in my present—a small wireless weather-forecasting kit, with barometer and thermometer, something that actually appealed to my scientific sensibilities. Marcus slowed on the drinks—he'd found another pretty woman to chat up, and apparently this time he didn't make the mistake of telling her what he did—and I didn't want to interrupt his rhythm.

I looked at the stairs twice, but I didn't go up them. I searched for Greg, and found Louise instead. She was leaning against a side of the arch, holding but not drinking a glass of champagne. She watched the proceedings with tired eyes.

When she saw me, she smiled again.

I wasn't sure I liked that. Two real smiles from Louise in one evening. Something had to be wrong.

"It's going well, isn't it?" she asked.

"Better than I would have thought," I said.

She sipped the champagne—or pretended to. Maybe that was one of her secrets. Pretending to drink when everyone around her got blotto.

"It's a tribute to you people," she said.

At first, I thought she meant the little people, the non-politicos, and then I realized she actually meant us, Dusty's Cleaning.

"Thanks," I said, glancing at those stairs.

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"I mean it," she said. "This place is cheerful. Who would have thought?"

I looked at her. Her entire face looked tired, and she was too thin. Maybe it was the strain of the party, or maybe something else had gone wrong in her life. I wasn't sure, and I wasn't about to ask.

"It's what we do," I said.

"Exorcise the ghosts," she said, as if in agreement.

But the ghosts weren't exorcised for me. They still lurked beneath the party favors and the seasonal joy. When this crowd left, and the caterers finished, when the last staff member shut off the lights, the house would revert to its post-murder self. The high-velocity spatter would paint itself on the walls, the cries would echo in the upstairs bedroom, and the blood would seep into the rugs.

I shuddered. I couldn't help it.

Of course, Louise noticed. "Does it still bother you?"

"Sometimes," I said before I could stop myself, "I think places like this should be burned."

Louise frowned at me. "That's an odd sentiment, coming from you."

I shrugged. "There are some places," I said, "that never get entirely clean."

The dream came as it often did. It started with my mother. She was on the floor of our kitchen, the smell of Lemon Pledge filling the air. When she saw me, she stood, apologized, and offered to cook. I thought it inappropriate to have the newly dead make the meal, and I told her so, even though I knew I was disappointing her.

She slipped out the side door, and as she did, she said, "You'll never see me again."

Only as I mulled over the words, I realized she hadn't said "see," she had said "find." *You'll never find me again.*

Then, in the transitionless magic of dreams, I stood in the foyer of the Moorhead house. The place smelled of weeks-old blood and voided bowels. Beneath those smells was that of rotted flesh.

As I stood there, I existed on two levels: the woman standing in the foyer, and the woman who knew every inch of that house, the one who had cleaned it all and who would, if she wasn't careful, become obsessed with it.

The walls in the upstairs bedroom had a spatter pattern that looked like a post-modernist painting. I knew that it was spray—a knife or something sharp pierced an artery, and the blood sprayed before the dying man? woman? child? turned so that the rest of the blood would shoot against a different wall.

Then the dream changed. The waiter stared at me with those cold blue eyes. I'd seen them before. Not at a party where he was curiously out of place but at the trial.

He sat in the second row from the back, and watched my every move. His face wasn't ruddy then, but he was thinner, sadder, and

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his eyes had fear in them.

I couldn't look at him as I testified. He made me nervous.

That day, everyone made me nervous.

I thought nothing of it.

You'll never find me again.

Then the scene changed once more. My mother's kitchen, without her body lying in the middle of the floor, looked like a happy place—painted yellow, spotlessly clean. Only a chair had moved, tilted away from the table, as if its occupant left suddenly.

Add the body to the picture, sprawled along the tile, arms thrown backward, fluids staining the clothes, and the moved chair was ominous. Had she stood because she felt ill? Or had she simply been crossing to the refrigerator when her body gave out?

Or had she been lying there, helpless, only able to slide a chair a little toward her, thinking maybe it would help her up, but the experiment didn't work, and she remained—alone—on her back, until she breathed her last.

I sat up, not sure exactly when I woke, when the dream ended and the thinking began.

We could guess about the bodies in the Moorhead house, but we didn't know. We didn't know if the ritual items—the desecrated religious symbols, the black candles, the knives—had been added later to throw us off. Because they had been removed as evidence before I arrived, I didn't even know if they'd been covered with spatter, proving they'd been in position before the family died.

I did know that they left no impression wherever they'd been. There were no knife-sized holes in the spatter pattern, no black candle wax on the side tables.

Only the blood and the stink and the sense that something horrible had happened here.

I turned on my too-large television. One of the get-rich-quick real-estate gurus hawked his no-money-down method. As house after house flashed on the screen, I wondered what secrets those houses held.

Over time, the secrets faded.

All bodies disappeared, forgotten, lost.

Did the people who owned my mother's house now enjoy their kitchen? Did they walk easily over the spot where she had spent her last hours? Did they wonder how long her body had been there, waiting for someone to find her?

More importantly, did they care?

And that's when my stomach turned, when the crazy food I had eaten backed up into my throat.

No one had cared at the Moorhead house party. If the murders were mentioned, it was with a salacious edge, as if the deaths were part of a setting, added for the partygoers' enjoyment.

Five people were missing, presumed dead—presumed because

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no one lost that much blood and lived.

But the police hadn't tested every drop. Only a few to make DNA comparisons, enough to build a case without a body—one of the toughest murder cases to bring. The cult—arrested, charged, and pulled off the street for life—had continually maintained their innocence.

I hadn't been able to look at them either when I testified—malnourished, scared twenty-somethings who'd used too many drugs and lived too close to the crime scene.

People had seen them in the house, but no one had seen them on the night of the murders.

No one had seen anything that night, even though the house dominated that hillside.

Even though the house dominated the entire town.

The next morning, we had a fire-clean. Mostly smoke and water damage. The apartment, on the lower floor of a large complex, had lost its kitchen, and the rest was ruined. But the upper floors were still livable if we could get the stench out, which we could.

The apartments had been evacuated, but they still held the stuff of people's lives—dolls scattered on a bedroom floor, slippers kicked aside in someone's haste to escape, a half-eaten pizza on a scarred coffee table.

I surveyed the damage, realized the cleaning would be one of our easier jobs, and called in a junior team. Then I went back to the office and pulled the Moorhead files.

The image of my mother's kitchen chair, fresh from my dream, haunted me. We had approached the Moorhead scene with a single assumption: that the family had been slaughtered there in a ritualistic way, and the bodies had then been moved.

But what if there had been no ritual? What if this had been a crime of passion? Blood was everywhere in that house, except the kitchen, an oddity explained at the time by the ritualistic nature of the deaths.

I didn't have crime-scene photos, but I did have my photos of the scene. It was the early days of my business; I did before-and-after photos for prospective clients.

The before photos were vicious and dark, grimmer than I remembered. But the blood spatter, the filth left from violent death, was much as my memory held it—a long, continuous spray, followed by real spatter, arcing as the blood pulsed from someone's body.

In one photo, my hand pressed on the rug, releasing the blood contained within. In another, the rivulets of blood went down the stairs, drops alongside heading away from the scene.

What had the police tested? What had they ignored?

I thumbed through until I found the bathrooms. They, like the bedrooms, were thick with blood. The toilet, the bathtub, and the

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sinks had light spray, but nothing inside the porcelain basins, suggesting that no one had cleaned up there.

No one had cleaned in the kitchen either.

I stared at the images, trying to recall the lesson of the dream. Take away my expectations, and what did I see?

A charnel house.

A place where blood was allowed to flow freely and for some time.

I closed the file and leaned on it, my stomach as queasy as it had been the night before. I rubbed my eyes, sighed heavily, and picked up the phone.

I had a lot of contacts at the police department. Early on, they had considered me part of the brotherhood, mostly because of my EMT and fire training, and they handed out my cards to grieving widows and distraught adult children.

Over time, several officers would call me before the city did, letting me know I had a job on the way, and preparing me so that I could put the proper team on it. If the case was sensitive, I often did the work myself. That way, if I found overlooked or lost evidence, I knew that it would be handled correctly. Mostly, I would leave it alone, and place a call on my cell. The forensic teams would arrive quickly because, I'd learned, it was me. My assistants often didn't get the same kind of respect.

Still, asking to see files in a case that had been closed for years was a sensitive thing. It irked all of us involved that we hadn't found the bodies, but, we had consoled ourselves, we had found the killers. I had taken this case as personally as the detectives who had worked it, and we all confessed late one night in the local cop bar that this was the case that haunted us.

Detective Jeffrey Foreno was the only one who had ever expressed doubts about the case. He had openly questioned whether the cult had done the killings. After all, he said, no blood was found in their hidey hole. No knives, no black candles. And nothing suggested they had been on the property that night. It had all been supposition and circumstance, fear and small-town politics.

He had been shushed pretty quickly.

So he was the one I went to that morning.

He was approaching retirement. The lines in his face were deep and grooved, accented by the white stubble he'd forgotten to shave off before coming to work. The rest of his hair was black and thick, in need of a cut. His eyes, once sharp and alert, were bloodshot, and when he saw me, he sighed.

"I knew someone would want to resurrect the dead." He leaned back in his chair, his hands folded over his stomach. "Just didn't expect it to be you."

I'd told him once I dreamed about cleaning the house, about the way the blood came back, as if the walls never wanted to give it

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up. He'd told me that he dreamed of the case too—of the Christmas tree that hadn't existed even though the outside of the house had been exquisitely decorated, of the lack of food in the kitchen, of the empty pet bowls, cleaned and stored in a dusty pantry.

"Why did you think someone would bring up the case?" I asked, sitting across from him.

He gave me one of those sideways looks that always made me nervous. Even with bloodshot eyes, Jeffrey Foreno had a way of looking all the way to your soul.

"The party," I said.

He pointed at me, which, in Jeff language, meant *You got it in one.*

"How come you didn't go?" I asked.

"It felt like dancing on someone's grave." Then he gave me that look again and his lips thinned. "You went."

I nodded. "Figured I had to. It had been my job to make sure no one noticed what had happened there."

He didn't move, nor did his expression change. "Did it work?"

I shrugged. "I think Louise was using the murders to give the place ambience."

"The power of rubbernecking," he said.

"Yeah." I wouldn't have put it so crassly, but he was right. Maybe that was why I hadn't gone upstairs, why I refused to look at the rooms where the police had assumed most of the killings had taken place. Downstairs, the tree, the presents, the food, masked the prurience that went into the planning. Upstairs, the unvarnished truth—the naked interest of people more fortunate than the dwellers of the Moorhead place—would have been readily apparent.

"Did it open old wounds?" he asked.

I shook my head quickly, not sure I wanted to examine my answer to that question too closely.

"So you just came today out of curiosity," he said as if he didn't believe it.

"I came because I saw someone." I told him about the waiter, the way the man had looked at me, both at the party and at the courthouse.

Foreno shrugged. "Maybe he was one of the rubberneckers. Some people make certain murder cases into their hobby."

"I know," I said. "But sometimes there's more to it."

He frowned at me.

"Remember anyone involved in the case who looked like that?"

"Like a perfect World War Two German? Can't say as I do."

Put that way, I wouldn't have recognized him either. "I'd like to look through the file."

"Be my guest," Foreno said. "It's not going to bother anyone. Unless you find something."

We grinned at each other. Then he led me to Records, got me the case files, and signed off so that I could work.

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The Moorhead file took up five boxes, most of them police and evidence reports. I gave the evidence reports a cursory glance, and saw exactly what I suspected: The assumptions began with the murder of the family and went from there. Most of the blood evidence was scraped from the wall of the bedroom—the crime-scene tech's reasoning was simple: He didn't want to deal with the inevitable carpet fibers in the blood pool. Although, to his credit, he did cut carpet swatches as well, and stored them in one of the refrigeration units at the crime lab. Unless someone needed the space, the evidence might still be there.

I searched through the boxes until I found what I was looking for. Pictures. Not of the house, but of the family.

Five members—husband, wife, three children, the oldest being fifteen, the youngest twelve. Speculation by the investigating officer was that one or all of the children had had contact with the cult.

I stared at the father. His face was bony and Aryan too, almost but not quite the same as the waiter I had seen. The eldest son, fourteen, looked like his father or might have if he'd lived. That heavy bone structure was unusual, at least in these parts. I thumbed through the documents to see if there were other family members in the vicinity.

No one had located any. Pages and pages of police interviews, with neighbors, coworkers, friends, did not include anyone from the family.

Then I looked at the mug shots of the cult members. I remembered those faces from the trial as well. Young, confused, ravaged, they made me wonder whether those kids were vulnerable because they were following the wrong leader or whether they had followed the wrong leader because they were vulnerable.

I closed the boxes, feeling more uncertain than I had before I started. I put them back, and went upstairs to say goodbye to Foreno.

"Find anything?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Let it rest." Then he gave me that look. "You're not going to, are you?"

"Who inherited the house?" I asked.

"No one," he said. "The state ended up with it."

"No family," I said.

"None that we could find." He tapped a pen against the top of his desk. "And before you ask, let me tell you I remember this because it seemed so damn odd. Two middle-aged parents with no family at all. No one remembered any grandparents or aunts and uncles visiting the kids. These people were an island."

"Their money went to the state, too?"

"Eventually," he said. "Not that there was much of it."

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"In a house like that?"

"Mortgaged and credit cards. The furniture wasn't even worth anything. The appearance of money, but no real money."

"Don't you find that strange?"

"Always have," he said.

"The guy I saw," I said, "looks a lot like the father."

Foreno cursed, then leaned back in his chair. "You sure?"

"It's not him," I said. "There're differences."

"Family differences?"

"I'd've thought they were brothers or cousins," I said.

Foreno frowned. Then he reached to the left and opened his bottom desk drawer. From my vantage, standing, I could see a dozen accordion files, all filled with manila folders. He thumbed through the files, then pulled out one folder.

He slid it to me, and stood.

"You want some lunch?" he asked. "I'm buying."

I looked at him with surprise.

He nodded toward a chair in the corner. "It'll take you awhile to go through that."

"A sandwich would be nice," I said.

He grabbed his suit coat, then headed out the door. As he left, he pulled the door closed, so that someone passing by wouldn't be able to see me.

I found that curious, but not as curious as the file. It was thick with newspaper clippings and computer printouts, some more than a decade old.

Cult killings, ritual murders, and bodiless cases. This was Foreno's comparison file. He was right: It took me quite a bit of time to read it. He managed to return with the sandwiches and we ate in silence while I read about beheadings and disembowlings, about corpses left in pieces all over property, about candles and black magic and pagan ceremonies.

In each, the bodies remained.

"You don't think they did it," I said as I tossed my sandwich wrapper into the nearby trash.

"The cult?" He shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

"But the evidence points to them."

"Rather neatly," he said.

"So why didn't you speak up?"

"Because I had no other theory of the case," he said.

"Do you now?" I asked.

"Does your friend work for the catering firm?" And I realized he meant the man with the angular face.

"I think so."

"I'll see if I can track him down."

"And if you do?"

Foreno shrugged. "I'll see what happens next."

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I went back to work, thinking about all that blood, all those trails. The carpets were saturated, yet there were no footprints on the hardwood floors, no evidence of someone leaving through the front or back doors. The floors had been well-scrubbed with bleach, and one of the things I testified about was the way that bleach hid all evidence, one of the few things that masked even the goriest scene.

Why, the defense attorney had wanted to know, *would someone remove the footprints, but leave the blood droplets? Why leave the drag marks on the carpet uncleaned?*

I had shrugged. *People aren't that thorough. They clean only what they believe needs cleaning.*

Blood is blood, isn't it? he had asked, implying that someone who cleaned footprints on the hardwood would clean it all.

It's not that simple, I said. *I've had employees who missed spatter on their first few jobs because the scene was too overwhelming.*

Do you think the killer would be overwhelmed? the defense attorney had asked, but the prosecutor had objected to the question. I never got to answer.

Would the killer have been overwhelmed? I considered the question now, at the safety of my desk. Probably not. After all, he created the scene.

Three saturated carpets. Five dead humans. Six quarts of blood per body. That house was soaked, the scene an example—the prosecutor had said—of overkill.

We see what we want to see.

I went back to my notes and, for the first time, did the math.

There was too much blood. None of us had realized it. At least twice the amount that should have been in that house. Twice the deaths? Or had someone taken buckets of blood and poured it on the carpets, letting the liquid soak in after he had expertly sprayed the walls.

Reproducing crime scenes wasn't hard. Hollywood did it all the time, and there were photos of other scenes everywhere from forensic journals to true-crime novels. Spatter and spray would be easy to reproduce—plant misters, set just right, would mimic the early parts of spray, and something with a bit of kick would be able to reproduce the way that blood spurted from an artery.

There'd be mistakes, but who would look for them? Especially in an overwhelming and fairly obvious scene.

Too much blood wasn't enough for Foreno to reopen the case—it was a closed murder trial, after all. But the blood evidence, coupled with the young man I'd seen, was enough to get Foreno working it again, on the side, in his spare time.

First, he had a crime-scene friend reexamine the photos, not explaining anything about the case.

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Second, he looked in the Moorhead family background.

Third, he searched for the waiter.

And those three things came together into something both expected and unexpected. The tech said the scene might've been tampered with. Impossible to know now, although the blood was suspicious. Maybe someone else died.

The Moorheads traveled. They were running from debt in Michigan and used charm as well as the cosignature of an old friend to secure the house, which then got them credit cards and a new future.

Until the bank was ready to foreclose. Until the credit-card companies had cut them off.

And the cosigner? The same man who had waited tables that night. The one who had watched the court case. He was living under an alias, one he'd established twenty years before after he had embezzled fifty thousand dollars from a bank in the Midwest.

The bank where his brother had once worked.

The waiter wouldn't talk to the police—hiring a lawyer immediately—but his presence was enough to get those carpet samples tested.

Still refrigerated, still intact after all these years. Sometimes laziness was its own reward.

And that, Foreno said when he came to my office in May, was when it got interesting. The blood was all the same type—O positive—but that was all it had in common. DNA testing proved that the blood came from dozens of sources, none of them related to the so-called victims.

Just the blood on the wall came from the family and, judging by the overlap in one of the bedrooms, had been applied just like I mentioned, with a sprayer and a lot of determination.

"Why?" I asked. "Why not just disappear? These people were smart enough to create new identities once before."

And that was when he showed me the police files. He'd actually made copies for me so that I could look at them.

Pages and pages and pages of complaints filed by the family about the neighbors, about the young people in the house at the foot of the hill, about the parties and the goings-on, about the fears of devil worship and a possible cult.

Foreno shook his head. "Looks to me like pure old-fashioned hatred."

"For their neighbors?"

"Their young, unusual, and loud neighbors," Foreno said.

"They set these kids up?" I asked, and felt a shock at myself. I was willing to believe that a cult could kill an entire family; I was not willing to believe that a family would set up innocent people in a way that might send them to jail for life.

"Looks like it," he said. "We've got work to do. They've got ten years and a lot of thinking on us."

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"But you'll find them," I said.

"I hope so," he said. "But in life, there are no guarantees."

Except one.

The story leaked, and the leak coincided with the release of the annual budget. The party, the plans for the museum, and the cost to the taxpayer made page one of our usually sleepy rag.

For a while, it looked like Louise might implode because of the scandal. Then she hit on the right note: The case wouldn't be reopened—innocent people wouldn't be getting out of jail—if she hadn't been interested in the house in the first place.

She had a point, one I didn't care to think about.

Then one afternoon shortly after Halloween I had to go to the Moorhead house for the final time.

I went with various attorneys—the D.A., several assistants, and defense attorneys for a variety of clients from the waiter to the cult. Someone had found the youngest son in Miami, but he hadn't given up the rest of his family. His very presence—alive—in another state was enough to place doubt on the entire cult-killings story.

He wasn't represented by an attorney, so far as I knew, but I didn't ask a lot of questions.

Instead, I answered them, explaining what chemicals I had used, defending myself and why I hadn't noticed the irregularities in the spatter, the extra blood, the lack of footprints.

Over and over again, I said simply that it wasn't my job.

And it wasn't. I was supposed to clean, not think. I was supposed to make the place livable again, and I had.

I had done everything I'd contracted to do.

Maybe that was why the house had haunted me so. Why I had dreamed of it, why the blood kept reappearing on the walls—not as if it couldn't be buried, but as if there was too much of it to contain.

My subconscious had known.

My conscious mind had refused to accept anything but what it had been told: A family had been murdered by their neighbors, a murderous cult, and the bodies hidden.

Differing interpretations of the same evidence, evidence not examined closely by any of us.

Except the brother, who had made two mistakes. First, he had come to the trial—nervously and obsessively worrying—to see if anyone had found the planted evidence. Or maybe he was stunned and appalled that a case with no bodies generated enough evidence for a conviction. Maybe the family had merely meant to harass the cult, not destroy their lives.

Then he had come back to the house, deliberately getting hired, just so he could see the site of his—and his family's—triumph. Or maybe he had still been worried, still afraid that he would get

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caught. Maybe he was guarding the place, hoping that no one figured it out.

Or maybe he simply couldn't stay away.

Like I couldn't.

I take evidence of a hideous event and make it vanish. I call that healing, but really, it's just masking. The event remains. It is history; it has happened. I allow people to pretend everything is all right.

What happened in the Moorhead house that day was the opposite of what I do. That family had used a masking technique to get revenge on people they hated, and in the process, managed to disappear with no consequences at all. They left debts, and dozens of families in ruins.

They left a chair pushed out, and knew that we would assume the worst.

We prosecuted based on that assumption, and received a conviction. And I cleaned up the mess so thoroughly that we have to use photographs and cut pieces of rug, miraculously saved. We can't revisit the scene with Luminol, trying to see what had happened before, because I smeared it trying to make the home safe, trying to make it—and us—forget.

We'll never know for certain what happened in that house. Just like we'll never know why another neighbor down the street finished his pie last Thanksgiving and then took his own life.

Just like I'll never know how long my mother lay on the floor of her kitchen, conscious and hoping someone would find her.

We can clean the mess, but the uncertainties remain.

There are Christmas lights around the Moorhead house this year, but there will be no party. It's not in the budget. Once the appeals are over, once the trials have ended, the house will become a museum, just like Louise dreamed.

But people aren't going to go inside to look at one of the city's first houses, thinking about old Josiah Moorhead and the power he had because he had the foresight to build ferries that crossed the river. People will go into his house to see if they can find that one piece of evidence, that one spot of blood, that one thing I might have missed in my thorough cleaning, hoping to see if they can solve the case that nearly cost a group of rowdy and unconventional young people their lives.

I won't go back. I'm not going into any damaged houses anymore. I'm strictly management now—assigning teams, paying bills. I can't look at interiors filled with the leftovers of other people's lives and worry that something important has been missed.

I don't want that responsibility.

My imagination is too strong, my memories too fresh.

I don't need any more ghosts.

I have enough already. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

A Gateway to Heaven

by Edward D. Hoch

It had been a long time since Susan Holt had thought of Mike Brentnor, who used to work with her in the promotions section of Mayfield's Department Store. Susan was director of promotions now and Mike had fallen off her radar years ago. That was why it was such a surprise hearing his voice on the phone that balmy May evening.

"Susan? How are you? It's Mike."

She hesitated, thumbing through the index of her memory before asking, "Mike who?"

"Mike Brentnor! Don't tell me you've forgotten me!"

"Of course not, Mike. But it's been a lot of years. What are you doing now?"

"This and that. Right now I'm promoting the new racetrack they're building near the Catskills. I was wondering if I could buy you a drink."

There was a time when they'd been friends, but that was long over. "I don't think that would be a good idea, Mike. I'm pretty tired after a day at work."

"It's nothing personal. I want to talk about a business deal."

"Mike—"

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"How about lunch tomorrow? At that place across from Mayfield's?"

She smiled into the phone. "You've been away too long, Mike. That place, Sandra's, is long gone. It's a drugstore now."

"Where do you eat lunch?"

"Most days I skip it, or send out for a sandwich."

"You're missing a good opportunity, Susan."

For what? she wondered. *A roll in the hay?* But she relented and said, "I could meet you for a quick drink tomorrow after work, but I'd have to leave by six-thirty."

The protagonist of this new story, Susan Holt, is a seldom seen Hoch character. But last year "A Convergence of Clerics" (December 2006), a tale featuring the amateur sleuth, placed third in *EQMM*'s annual Readers Award competition, inspiring the author to bring the crime-solver back for another case. ¶

"Fine! Whereabouts?"

"Nathan's is as good as any place. Five-thirty?"

"Swell! I'll see you then."

The following day was filled with the usual Wednesday staff meetings, plus a brief office party for one of Susan's assistants who was leaving. By the time five o'clock rolled around she still hadn't caught up with the work she'd planned. For a moment she considered skipping the drink with Mike Brentnor, but then decided she had to show up. She was not one to break her promises.

Nathan's was crowded with the usual five-o'clock faces and she noticed a couple of young administrative assistants looking surprised to see her there. She almost regretted her choice of meeting places, but then she spotted Mike holding down a booth in the far corner. It took her an instant to recognize his face behind the dark moustache and neatly trimmed beard, but the familiar lopsided grin was still there.

"What's with all the hair?" she asked, giving him a formal handshake in greeting.

"It's my new, more mature self. How've you been, Susan?"

"Fine. I had a nice cruise on the *Dawn Neptune* awhile back. We opened a Mayfield's branch on board."

"Hey, I read about that!" He signaled to the waitress. "What are you drinking?"

"Just a Corona for me. It's a bit early in the evening."

He ordered the same, and when the beers arrived he ceased the casual chatter and came to the point. "It's about this new racetrack near the Catskills. It's going to be a really class place, with the Gateway resort hotel and casino already open. They were forever trying to get state approval. You know how those things are, owned by Native Americans but operated by professionals." He took a sip of beer, collecting foam on his moustache. "I have two things I wanted

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to ask you about. First, might Mayfield's be interested in opening a branch in the hotel? They're developing a little street of luxury shops."

Susan smiled and shook her head. "That's out of my hands. New branches are a top management decision. It took them months of meetings to approve the *Dawn Neptune* branch."

"All right," he said. "It was worth a try. Here's the second thing. I don't know how you're fixed financially, but there's a great opportunity for new investors in this place."

She simply stared at him. "You're asking me to invest my money in it?"

"Look, Susan, you've got a top job at Mayfield's now, earning big bucks. You get in on the ground floor here and you'll be set for life."

"Sorry, Mike, I can't do it."

He lowered his voice a notch. "I've got the inside dope on this track. I can't go into detail, but once this place is up and running it'll be a gold mine for bettors with the right information."

"And when will that be?"

"The hotel is open now, and they're putting the finishing touches on the track and grandstand. We hope to have racing by the end of next month. The track itself was designed by a Chinese expert, Lam Kow Loon. He's done a number of tracks in China and one in Hong Kong."

Somehow the entire thing struck her as funny. He wasn't trying to seduce her after all, just persuade her to invest in a racetrack. Susan downed the rest of her beer. "I'm sorry, Mike, but I'm not the person you want. I've no loose change for investments of that sort."

He wasn't quite ready to give up. "Look, the Memorial Day weekend is coming. Can I drive you up there to look the place over? We could stay at the new hotel. . . . Separate rooms, of course."

Then she had to laugh. "I can't. You're a nice guy, but I guess we're on different wavelengths. Have a good holiday."

"Susan—"

"I have to get going now." She stood up. "Thanks for the beer. Good seeing you again, Mike."

The Memorial Day weekend started out on the cool side, but Susan didn't care. Her closest friend was out of town and she looked forward to just relaxing. She went for a run in Central Park on Saturday morning and returned to her apartment invigorated just after noon. The phone was ringing as she walked in the door. She recognized Mike Brentnor's voice at once.

"Susan, I need help! I'm in big trouble up here." She could hear noise in the background, perhaps a television.

"What's going on? Where are you?"

"I'm with some people. They left me alone for a minute so I'm taking a chance and calling you. They're dangerous. They've got guns."

"You should call the police instead of me."

"No! Listen, Susan, you have to come up here today."

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"I can't—"

"Please, I'm begging you. I have no one else to ask. I'm staying at the Big Bear Inn near Middletown on route 86, but I'm not there now."

"What do you want of me, Mike?" she asked.

"It's that racetrack thing I was telling you about. These people need some plans that I have. I want you to get them for me."

"Mike, this is crazy. I'm calling the police."

"If you do that, they might kill me. Listen, all you have to do is go to the Big Bear Inn and pick up a portfolio being held for me at the front desk."

"Why can't you do it yourself?"

"They won't let me go. I'll explain later, but right now I need your help. You can drive up here in a couple of hours and it'll all be over."

For anyone else it would have been an easy decision to hang up the phone and call the police. Or else simply forget the whole thing. If Mike Brentnor had gotten himself into a jam he'd have to get himself out or suffer the consequences. She couldn't imagine why he would reappear in her life now, with this crazy story about a racetrack.

And then something clicked in her memory. Mike knew that she'd been involved in several crime investigations in the past, and thought of herself as something of a detective. Maybe that's why he'd turned to her for help.

"All right," she heard herself say. "I'll do it. I'll just ask for your portfolio at the desk?"

"That's right. I'll call them and describe you, tell them it's all right."

"Look, Mike, why couldn't one of these people you're involved with do the same thing?"

"I can't let them get the portfolio. It's the only evidence I have against them."

"If I get this thing, where'll I bring it?"

"I'm at One Twenty-four Summit Street, but keep the portfolio hidden after you get it. Someone at the hotel can give you directions here. I'm hoping they'll let me go without having the portfolio, but I'll trade it for my life if I have to."

"All right," she told him, hoping she wouldn't regret her decision. "I can start out in about a half-hour."

"They're coming back!" he said quickly, breaking the connection.

Susan expected the traffic to be fierce on Saturday afternoon of Memorial Day weekend, but most travelers must have gotten a Friday head start. Once she crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge things moved right along and she found the Big Bear Inn along the new route 86 without difficulty. The room clerk was an attractive brunette woman with pale skin and a nametag that read *Rita*.

"I'm here to pick up a portfolio for Mike Brentnor," she said.

"What's your name?"

"Susan Holt."

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Rita nodded. "He called to say you'd be coming by." Reaching under the desk she produced a brown leatherette case of the sort artists or architects might carry.

"Thanks," Susan said. "Can you give me directions to Summit Street?"

"Turn right at the next stoplight. That's Summit."

She put the portfolio in the trunk of her car, under a blanket, and tried calling Mike, but there was no answer. The address was easy to find, a gray two-story house in need of repair. She pulled in the driveway and rang the doorbell. From somewhere inside she heard Mike yelling. She tried the door and it was unlocked. Carefully opening it, she found a sparsely furnished living room. Mike was seated on the floor, handcuffed to a radiator pipe.

"My God, Mike! What happened?"

"I think someone's been shot. The killer might still be here. Do you have your phone?"

"Right here."

"Call nine-one-one and get the police here."

She called as instructed and then turned to Mike. "Tell me what happened."

"Do you have the portfolio?"

"In my car trunk."

"Don't mention that to the police."

"Where's the key to these cuffs?"

"Lam Kow has it. I came here to meet him, but there was someone in the kitchen that I never saw. Lam Kow caught me phoning you, took my cell phone, and handcuffed me to this radiator. Then he went back in the kitchen and seemed to be arguing with someone. I heard a shot, then nothing. I thought I'd be a dead man any minute, but no one came back through the kitchen door. After a few minutes I heard a thumping, as if a body was being dragged downstairs."

Already two state police cars were pulling up in front of the house. She opened the door for them. "Are you the one who called?" a trooper asked.

"That's me, Susan Holt." She told them what she knew, omitting mention of the portfolio. "The killer might still be here."

They quickly searched the house, guns drawn, and reported finding a body at the foot of the basement stairs. "I'm Corporal DeGeorgio," one trooper said. "We found this key in the dead man's pocket. It might fit those cuffs. The rest of the place is empty, but a back door is unlocked. This cell phone was on the kitchen table. Is it yours?"

"Yeah," Mike told him. "He took it from me when he handcuffed me."

The key unlocked the cuffs and Mike relaxed a little, happy to be free. His familiar lopsided grin returned. "I really got myself into a mess this time," he told Susan. "I think you saved my life."

Another police vehicle arrived, and two more troopers entered

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with cameras and crime-scene equipment. DeGeorgio directed them to the basement, then said, "We'll need a preliminary statement from you, Mr. Brentnor."

Mike repeated his story. "I've been doing some promotion work for the new racetrack and Gateway casino up here. This Chinese architect, Lam Kow Loon, is designing the racetrack part. He's done some tracks in China and Hong Kong. Anyway, he was looking for investors to help pay for some additional features not covered in the original budget."

"What sort of features?" DeGeorgio asked, making notes.

"I don't know exactly. He never told me." Mike avoided Susan's eyes as he spoke.

"Go on. What happened here today?"

"He asked me to come up and talk over my promotion plans for the track."

"Was he alone?"

"There was someone else in the kitchen that I didn't see."

"How did you happen to phone Miss Holt here?"

"He wanted me to suggest investors. I'd spoken to Susan about it earlier so I called her. Lam Kow thought I was trying to make trouble for him. He took out a gun and searched me for a weapon. Then he handcuffed my wrist to that pipe."

She noticed he'd been careful not to mention the portfolio, which was what Lam Kow Loon must have been after. "Did you witness the shooting?" DeGeorgio asked.

"No. Lam Kow left me here and went into the kitchen to talk with this other person. I could hear the murmur of voices. Next thing I knew, there was a shot. I was really scared then. I could hear noise, probably the body being dragged down the basement stairs, then there was just silence. I didn't know what to do because I was afraid he'd kill me next. For a long time I was afraid to do anything but keep silent. He'd taken my cell phone so I couldn't call the police."

The trooper nodded. "The back door was unlocked. That's how the killer left. We found a pistol in the trash barrel, probably the murder weapon. You'd better come look at the body."

"Do I have to?"

"He's Asian, but we need to know whether he's Lam Kow Loon or the other guy."

Mike followed them down the basement stairs while Susan tentatively brought up the rear. The body was at the bottom, faceup, and the bloody steps showed it had been dragged down. Mike gasped and managed to say, "That's him. That's Lam Kow Loon."

"And you don't know the name of the other man, the one who shot him?"

"I never saw him."

Corporal DeGeorgio nodded again and closed his notebook. "I'll have to ask you both to give us your home addresses."

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"We're not from here," Susan told him. "I work for Mayfield's Department Store in New York. Here's my card."

"All right. Both of you come along with me and we'll try to get to the bottom of this."

Susan was beginning to regret that she hadn't stayed in New York.

It was almost evening before they were finally free of the state police, having made and signed official statements. As they walked out to their cars, the first thing Mike asked was, "Do you have the portfolio?"

"It's in my trunk. What's this all about?"

"Let's go back to my hotel room and I'll show you."

"I don't want to see your etchings, Mike. I only want to know what you've gotten yourself—and me—involved in."

"Trust me, I'll show you."

Susan had already decided to spend the night at the Big Bear rather than drive back to the city so late. When they got there, Rita was still on the desk and checked her in. "You're lucky to get a room here on a holiday weekend," she said. "And I see you found Mike Brentnor, too."

"I sure did!"

"Room Sixteen. It's right down the hall from his room."

Susan grunted noncommittally and accepted the key. She followed Mike to his room, realizing for the first time that she'd brought no extra clothes or toilet articles with her for an overnight stay. When she mentioned this to him, he assured her they could purchase whatever she needed. "There's a drugstore down the road that's more like a general store. They even sell T-shirts."

"We'll try that later," she said as they entered his room. "Now let's see your etchings or whatever you have in that portfolio."

"It's not mine. Lam Kow Loon loaned it to me to study his proposal. He was upset when I didn't return it right away. Look at this." He unzipped the leatherette case and opened it, revealing architect's renderings of the racetrack and clubhouse, together with a detailed diagram of the racecourse itself, with distances and grading carefully marked. At one point, where the finish line was indicated, a row of dots had been carefully marked across the track, with Chinese symbols next to them.

"He's the one who tried to sell you shares in this?"

"That's right."

"But—but he didn't own the track, did he? How could he be selling shares in it?"

"He wasn't selling shares in the track, but in his invention. Look here." He opened a manila envelope beneath the drawings. It contained press clippings in Chinese and English. One of the English clippings was from a Hong Kong daily newspaper, the other from the *New York Times*. Both told of the discovery of a remote-controlled device buried in the turf at the starting gate of Hong Kong's

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Happy Valley Racecourse.

"What is this?" she asked, still unable to make sense of it.

"They found a mechanism with a dozen launching tubes buried at the starting gate. It could use compressed air to fire tiny darts into the bellies of the racehorses. The darts were filled with poison or a tranquilizer in an attempt to fix the outcome of the races."

"And you're part of this?"

"Not of poisoning horses. Lam Kow knew of the Hong Kong plan and claimed to have worked on the device. He said it could also be used to deliver stimulants to horses we want to win."

"And you asked me to invest in this? They test racehorses for drugs, you know."

"He claimed these would be undetected."

"Mike, this is the craziest scheme I ever heard of! Do you think the horses will just stand there quietly when the darts hit their bellies?"

"He claimed the mechanism was already in place at the new track. The starting gate is often moved at tracks, but the tubes are buried at the most frequent gate location."

"Did you give him any money?"

He averted his eyes. "Two thousand dollars. He said he had to have more. That's why I asked you to go in with me."

"I don't believe any of it. They may have tried that stunt in Hong Kong, but it would never work here. I'll tell you the sort of bet I like. I'll bet you ten bucks this device isn't buried at the new track at all."

He thought about that. "It's a bet. Look, as long as you're staying over, let's grab dinner somewhere and then go out there and look around."

"Out there?"

"The track. Are you game?"

Susan took a deep breath. "Sure, why not?" If he had other things in mind, she was probably as safe out there as in his hotel room. Safer, maybe. "I still have to stop at that drugstore, remember."

They decided to try dinner at the new Gateway casino hotel next to the track. It was an almost lavish place, with much of the glitter of Vegas and Atlantic City casinos, but done on the cheap. The fancy Roman columns at the entrance had a hollow sound to them, and gold wallpaper in the gaming room was already beginning to peel in one or two spots. The dining room food was passable, not great, and the drinks were on the watery side. Still, the place was crowded with folks obviously enjoying themselves. The ringing of slot-machine wins seemed almost constant.

"You folks need help?" a handsome man in a tux asked them. "I'm Ron Meyer, the room manager. This your first visit to the Gateway?"

"It is," Susan told him. "We just ate in the dining room. When does the track open?"

"Not till next month. We wanted to have it running for the holiday,

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but we couldn't quite make it."

"Well, we'll be back," Mike told him.

It had grown dark while they ate and as they left the hotel they headed for the parking lot, then cut across toward the gate to the racetrack. "How do we get in?" she asked him.

"I've got a key. Lam Kow gave me one when he hired me to promote the track." He had the padlock open in seconds and they walked out in front of the darkened grandstand. "The clubhouse is on this end, with its own dining room and betting windows. The track is arranged so the finish line is opposite the clubhouse. The track is one mile around, and that's the length of most major races, so the starting gate is at the finish line. For a shorter race of seven furlongs or less, the gate is moved to the other side of the track. For the occasional race a mile and one-sixteenth or longer, it's moved back a bit."

"So Lam Kow's scheme could only fix mile-long races."

"Correct, but that's most of the important ones." He used a penlight to guide her onto the track itself. "We should look for evidence of digging, but the system may have been in place since construction started last summer. Take my flashlight and—"

He was interrupted by the crack of a gunshot as a clot of dirt kicked up at their feet. "Someone's shooting at us!" Susan shouted, dropping flat on the ground.

"Damn!" Mike doused the light and was beside her in an instant as a second shot cracked in the night air. "It's Lam Kow's partner, the one who killed him!"

She grabbed the penlight from him and turned it back on, covering the bulb with the palm of her hand. Then she hurled it as far as she could, close to the ground. Two more shots were fired at the light. The second one nicked it, sending it spinning off course. "He's a good shot," Susan whispered.

"We've got to get out of here."

"How?"

"They have a watchman here day and night. He must have heard the shots."

"Unless he's dead, too."

They stayed there hugging the dirt for a quarter of an hour, until Mike started a slow crawl back the way they had come. Susan reluctantly followed. They reached the gate without incident and found a burly watchman at the opening. He was a Native American, the first they'd seen at this supposed Indian casino site. "Was that you fired those shots?" he asked.

"No indeed," Mike told him. "Someone was shooting at us."

"This here's private property."

"My name is Mike Brentnor. I'm handling promotions for the track. I have a key."

"Your name's not on my list."

"I'm working with Lam Kow Loon, the track designer. We're stay-

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ing at the Big Bear."

"I just heard on the news he got killed. You'd better come into my office so I can check you out."

They followed him into a construction trailer parked nearby. "My name's Fred Chatow," he told them. "Now let's see some ID."

"Right here," Mike said. "How late are you on duty?"

"Noon to midnight, then the other guy comes on. Long hours, but easy work."

He seemed satisfied by what they showed him and he allowed them to go on their way. Susan stopped at the drugstore for some toothpaste, a toothbrush, and a T-shirt. When they got back to the Big Bear it was almost midnight.

"That starting gate could be a gateway to heaven for some of those horses," Mike remarked. "We were shot at because they feared we'd find out that device was really there."

"Or else because we'd find out it wasn't there."

They stopped in the hotel bar for a late-night drink, talking over what had transpired that day. "All I know is that someone tried to kill us tonight," she told him. "I'm heading back in the morning. You can do what you want."

"Susan, I shouldn't have involved you in all this."

"No, you shouldn't have."

"I'm beginning to think that Lam Kow Loon was nothing but a clever con man. He took those newspaper clippings and a few sketches of the track and built them into a major swindle."

She wasn't about to argue with him. "In the future, choose your business acquaintances more carefully," she advised.

They paid their tab and got up to go. "Who do you think was shooting at us?" he asked. "Who was Lam Kow's partner in this?"

They were walking along the hall to their rooms when it began to come clear to Susan. "I think I know the answer to that, but it doesn't explain—"

He'd slipped his key card into the slot and was opening the door as she spoke. As he started into the room, three quick shots lit up the darkness. He gasped and fell back, pulling Susan to the floor with him.

"Mike!" she screamed.

The gunman leaped over their fallen bodies and into the hall. She saw Corporal DeGeorgio appear from somewhere and bring him down with a quick chop to the neck. It was the track watchman, Fred Chatow, of course, but that didn't matter just then. "Get an ambulance!" she cried out. "Mike's still alive."

She insisted on riding with him in the ambulance, holding off the intern with his needle. "Just a minute," she pleaded. "I have to tell him something."

Mike Brentnor opened his eyes and stared at her, perhaps unsee-

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ing. "Who was it?" he managed to whisper, his mouth filling with blood.

"Chatow, the watchman. He had to be in on it, or how could they ever have dug that trench and buried the device? It had to be after dark, before he went off duty at midnight. The troopers got him. DeGeorgio had been following us after a report of gunshots at the track."

"It hurts, Susan," he managed to say.

"I know. We're almost to the hospital."

"Chatow must have killed Lam Kow so he'd have the whole thing for himself." More blood, and she knew she'd have to speak faster.

"No, Mike. Chatow couldn't have killed Lam Kow this afternoon because he told us he worked from noon to midnight. It had to be you."

His lids were starting to close. "What? What are you saying?" he asked, his words slurring.

"You said Lam Kow handcuffed you and took your cell phone as soon as you finished talking to me. If that were true, how could you have phoned the Big Bear and told Rita I was coming for the portfolio?"

"I—"

"You killed him, Mike. There was never anyone else at that house. You wanted this racetrack scheme for yourself, crazy as it was. You killed him, dragged his body to the basement, and dumped the gun in the rubbish barrel. You'd brought the handcuffs along yourself, and you planted the key in the dead man's pocket, then went back upstairs and cuffed yourself to the radiator. You had to leave the front door unlocked for me, of course, something Lam Kow would never have done. You knew I'd come, relying on my reputation for never breaking my promises. But he did have a partner, the track watchman, Fred Chatow. When he heard Lam Kow was dead, he knew you'd done it to get the track plans for yourself. He shot at us at the track, then after midnight he got into your hotel room and waited to kill you."

She realized his eyes were closed and he was no longer listening. "I'm afraid he's gone, miss," the intern told her.

They tried to revive him at the hospital but it was too late. She took the portfolio from the trunk of her car and gave it to Corporal DeGeorgio. He listened to her, shaking his head. "That's the craziest thing I ever heard. This Chinese fellow must have been a supreme confidence man to convince anyone it was true."

"Maybe not," Susan said. "If Chatow was in on the scheme, it must have been more than a con game. Something must really be buried out there." She remembered Mike Brentnor's phrase. "Sort of a gateway to heaven. For the bettors and maybe for the horses."

That was when she remembered the bet she'd made with Mike. If the mechanism was really there, she'd lost the bet. But Mike had lost more than that. ●

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WILSON'S MAN

by Doug Levin

It seemed to Ben that his new telephone rang in sharp, intrusive bursts. At least that's how he felt when Sidney Alstead called on Tuesday afternoon. He could tell from the caller ID that it was Sidney. For the first two rings, he dismissed the call outright, but on the fifth ring he answered hastily out of morbid compulsion. It was just as he had feared: Sidney had good news.

Sidney first materialized at an Advertising After Hours meeting at the Shiva, a trendy nightclub that specialized in world music. Any other business organization would have held its monthly networking meeting in the ballroom of an innocuous downtown hotel, but the Ad Federation preferred to waste its members' dues on the expensive pretense of style. The Shiva was down among riverside warehouses, where Ben hated to park his car for any length of time. He didn't much like navigating through the musty winos and panhandlers, either. Besides, the effect of the nightclub was lost on the advertising crowd: The house lights were up, and there was no music on at all.

Ben stood at a cocktail table by himself, surveying the crowd, casually looking to see if Wilson had dropped in. He turned his head in one direction and when he turned it back, a tall, broad man stepped abruptly—laterally—into his frame of vision.

"Sidney Alstead," the big man said, holding out his hand.

Ben set his gin and tonic down and shook hands. He was embarrassed that his hand was wet and clammy from the condensation on his glass. "Ben Barrow."

"Good to know you," said Sidney.

Ben had the uncomfortable feeling that he had met Sidney

An occasional reviewer for the *Oregonian* and a member of the National Book Critics Circle, Doug Levin is a relative newcomer to mystery writing, though a previous story of his, "Fire Lines," was published alongside works by Michael Connelly, George Pelecanos, and James Crumley in the collection *Measures of Poison*. His nonfiction has appeared in newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times*.

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before—perhaps at an agency years ago—but he would've remembered someone like Sidney. He had a high forehead and close-cropped black hair, and wore black horn-rimmed glasses—fashionable among the artistic set. But he didn't really look artistic. He looked like an ex-football player.

"What're you doing here?" asked Sidney bluntly. "Looking for work?"

Ben hesitated. "Not exactly . . ."

Sidney brightened and seemed to get a little wider. "Then you're looking for a few good men, maybe," he began his patter. "I'm a graphic designer, been at it—" He stopped when Ben shook his head and waved his hand in protest.

"No, no," Ben said. "Sorry to mislead you. I'm a designer myself. Been out on my own for a few years now. I'm not looking for a job, just trying to stay in touch, meet a few people . . ." His voice trailed off. It was hardly an explanation.

Sidney smiled, leaned forward, and actually put a hand on Ben's shoulder. "You're hustling just like the rest of us," he chuckled.

Ben supposed that it was true, though "hustle" didn't seem like exactly the right word. He hoped to see Wilson and some others, buttonhole them a bit, but it was hardly hustling. His work spoke for itself. "If you say so," he finally said.

"You want another of those?" Sidney pointed to his half-empty glass.

Ben didn't want to drink too many too quickly, but he said, "Okay, sure." He reached in his coat for his wallet.

"Forget it," Sidney said, "I can spring for a drink." He disappeared into the crowd, heading toward the bar.

Ben felt as if the air got immediately fresher. It occurred to him that Sidney might have been wearing some light cologne or aftershave. He imagined a thin trail of fragrance following Sidney to the bar, like slime behind a slug. It was a good image, but it would never work in an ad.

There was Wilson. He was tall enough to stand above most people, but thin and lanky, distinguished but not imposing. He had a young, attractive woman at his arm, probably part protégé and part handler. If Wilson made an appointment, she would write it down.

Ben caught his eye and moved across the room. They shook hands.

"Ben, good to see you," said Wilson. "How have you been?"

"Pretty well. Yourself?"

"Crazy. We won a couple of new accounts, and then a third just fell in our lap. You're having a good year?"

Ben had to play that question carefully. "Busy enough to stay out of trouble." He forced himself to smile. "But hoping to pick up another project or two before the end of the year." That sounded

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about right, not too desperate.

"Well, there might be something we can work out, especially while we get up to speed on these new accounts." He turned to the woman and gave her a curt nod. "Cynthia, Ben Barrow."

She held out a small hand. "Cynthia Phillips. Glad to know you."

"Ben needs to get on my radar in the next couple weeks," Wilson said to the woman, then added, "Ben, you call Cynthia next week and set something up."

It was that easy. Ben couldn't stop himself from starting to calculate how much might come in. Several thousand, at least. Ben saw that Wilson was done with him, looking out into the crowd for other familiar faces. For a split second, Wilson's eyes widened, almost in apprehension.

"There you are," Sidney's voice boomed behind Ben. "Here's your cocktail." He stepped forward and thrust the glass in Ben's hand.

Before Ben could say anything, Sidney thrust his hand at Wilson. "Sidney Alstead."

"Clifton Wilson." They shook hands.

"Clifton . . ." Ben hesitated. It was too late to say *Mr. Wilson.* "Clifton is the creative director at the Hamilton Group."

"Sure, I know your name," said Sidney, nodding with enthusiasm. "Glad we're getting a chance to meet. I remember when Madison Avenue was pretty excited about the work your team did on Red Sport."

Wilson smiled, uneasily, Ben thought. He wasn't the type of man to bear flattery. "That was a fun account," Wilson replied. "Helped put us on the map. You were in New York, then?"

"For a few years, after Rhode Island. Just a small cog at Ogilvy." That was supposed to be the Rhode Island School of Design and one of New York's top ad agencies, Ben knew. Sidney was carpet-bombing with names.

"You're an artist, then?" asked Wilson.

"With a small 'a.' Now I'm just a humble graphic designer." Sidney put his hand on his stomach and bowed slightly at the waist.

"Working for an agency here in town?"

"Not as yet," said Sidney. "A contract here, a contract there."

"Well, good," said Wilson. He gave another meaningful nod to the blond woman. "Why don't you send me some samples. Ben might be doing some work for us, too."

"I hope so," said Ben.

"He does great work," said Sidney.

"I know his work," said Wilson, flatly. "I'll be looking forward to hearing from both of you."

"Great," said Sidney. "I'll be in touch."

Ben simply nodded. Wilson returned the gesture and slipped onward into the milling crowd, the woman at his elbow.

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Ben expected Sidney to wink in friendly conspiracy, but the big man's mouth simply went slack and his brow hardened over his eyes. "Why didn't you say something about my work?"

"I don't know your work," Ben stammered.

"Well, I don't know your work, and that didn't stop me."

"I didn't ask for your endorsement. As Wilson said, he knows my work already."

"Wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement."

Ben wasn't going to admit to this hulking stranger that what he said was true. He had to get away. "Well, thanks for the drink." He held it up.

Sidney held Ben's gaze with a sour, smoldering look, and then his face became friendly and animated again. "My pleasure. Hey, let's be in touch."

Ben quickly agreed, if only to be rid of the man. "I'm easy to find. Barrow Design dot com."

"I'm just my name. Sidney Alstead, A-L-S-T-E-A-D, all one word, dot com."

Ben drifted back to his cocktail table, but found that it had been taken over by a group of youngsters, their heads together hatching some ambitious business plan. They collectively gave him an unwelcome look as he approached, and he veered awkwardly off to the bar. He set his half-finished drink on the bar, shrugged his shoulders, and headed for the coat check. His business was done.

Ben kicked a scrap of metal along the sidewalk. He should've stayed and enjoyed himself. Sidney Alstead was a big boor and probably a very mediocre talent, but at least he moved confidently among people. It must be easy if you were the size of a gorilla.

"How 'bout some spare change?"

Ben hadn't seen the two scruffy street kids in the doorway until they stepped out of the shadow. They both had glassy eyes and irregular stubble on their cheeks and chins.

"Okay," said Ben. He usually walked on past, shaking his head, but he stopped to dig for some parking money in his coat pocket. "Here." He dropped fifty cents into one boy's cupped hand and walked on.

"How 'bout a buck?" They skipped eagerly beside him, one at each arm. "You can afford it," the second kid added.

"No, sorry, that's it," said Ben, picking up his step a bit.

The first kid grabbed him lightly at the sleeve, like an escort, "How 'bout this coat, then?" He laughed. It was just a joke.

The other boy laughed along as well, and Ben felt a change in the air behind him. Mid-laugh, the boy was gone. As if in slow motion, the boy's body flew across the sidewalk and crumpled against the side of a building like a dropped dishrag. Sidney stood in the boy's place, his shoulder lowered but already turning. The second boy

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turned in wonder, his hand still clutching Ben's coat. Ben felt warm air rush by as Sidney's fist snaked past and crunched into the center of the boy's face. It made a horrible sound.

The boy was on his ass, his hand over his nose, with blood pouring between his fingers. The other youth was up on hands and knees, gasping for air. They both ran.

Ben could not speak. He could not think of any words, and his mouth was too numb to form them.

"Jeez, that could've been trouble," said Sidney, casually shaking the hand that had struck the blow. "You're all right, I take it?"

"Fine," Ben said like an automaton.

"I wouldn't bother reporting it to the police. There's a hundred or more down here just like them. You'll just waste your night filling out paperwork."

"Okay," said Ben, turning away from Sidney and starting to shuffle off toward his car.

"I'll walk you to your car, just in case," said Sidney, back at Ben's side, pivoting his head around like a soldier on patrol.

It was just a couple more blocks. Ben didn't say a word, looking surreptitiously at Sidney from time to time. Not a hair looked ruffled.

Sidney leaned his folded elbows on the top of Ben's car. "Don't worry about it," said Sidney. "Nothing to be ashamed about. A lot of people get mugged. Plus they had you outnumbered."

Ben saw no point in arguing, so he nodded.

"Pour yourself a stiff drink when you get home."

"I will," said Ben quietly. As he drove away, he saw Sidney in the rearview mirror, waving at Ben with a generous smile on his face.

When Ben got back to his townhouse, his heart was still racing. It wasn't out of fear, but embarrassment and maybe anger. He could've just shaken his arm loose from that kid, and that would've been the end of it. Jesus. He could still hear the grotesque pop when Sidney buried his fist into the boy's face. His nose was broken for sure. And then Sidney walked him to his car like a date. He should've said something right away to Sidney. Voiced his disapproval. No, that was too civilized. He should've told Sidney that he was a violent jerk, and even if Sidney were the next Michelangelo, he wasn't going to raise a finger to help him.

Still in his jacket, Ben went into the kitchen and poured himself a brandy. It warmed him immediately and stopped his heart from pounding in his ears. After a second drink, he felt, with some relief, that he had returned to his own skin once again. He crossed the living room to his workspace, turned on his computer, and logged on.

Sidney had a bare-bones website. Its design was sparse and simple, Asiatic almost in its colors and lines, even a little feminine.

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Anyone who hired Sidney after viewing his website would be shocked when they met him. The samples were diverse and professional, glib even, but without any personal expression. Each could've been the work of a different designer.

Good meeting you, he typed to Sidney in an e-mail. *I took a look at your website. You have some sharp-looking samples. I'll drop a note to Wilson. Tell him to look at your stuff.*

He paused for a minute, trying to formulate some delicate words about the encounter. Something friendly and thankful, but with quiet remonstrance. *And thanks for showing up at just the right moment this evening. It could've gotten ugly, I suppose. Still, I'm not sure that you needed to be so hard with what were, after all, just a couple of harmless street kids.*

Ben read it all over and then impulsively cut out the last sentence. He typed his name and clicked "Send." He did drop a note to Wilson, to say that he was glad to have seen him, and that he would set something up through Cynthia Phillips. In the end, he casually decided that it would be inappropriate for him to offer an assessment of Sidney Alstead's work.

The light was brilliant in the restaurant booth. Ben sat with his occasional client, Margaret Chase, next to a high window that let in the reflection of winter sunlight, which bounced off small banks of snow and slick streets.

"That storm cleared through fast," said Margaret.

"It did," Ben agreed.

They spoke of the weather and coming holiday plans, and then ordered their lunch. Ben ordered something light, so he could talk comfortably.

"How's business been?" Margaret asked.

"Okay for this economy. Looks like I might be picking up some more work with the Hamilton Group. A furniture manufacturer."

Margaret nodded enthusiastically. She took a personal interest in Ben's career, which he mildly resented. "I read in the *City Journal* that they won a few new big contracts."

"So it would seem," Ben said. "I think they're still dickering a little. I helped with some initial concepts on one project, but they're on radio silence now."

"Same old story. Hurry up and wait."

Ben nodded and took a roll from the basket.

"I'm working with a software company that needs a fresh set of sales tools to promote a new release." She set a small portfolio where an extra place setting had been cleared and opened it to a set of matching brochures. "I was thinking something along the line of these pieces. At least conceptually."

"You do these?" Ben asked.

"I did," said Margaret, a little color rising in her neck. "Almost a

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decade ago." Ben knew that she had a quiet pride about her old design work. She had given it up after surgery for carpal tunnel didn't help. But she had a good business as a marketing consultant.

"They have a little of that 'nineties wave-of-the-future look, but they're pretty good pieces," said Ben. She always appreciated his professional assessment of her past work. He wondered if she suspected that he quietly pulled his punches.

"You obviously see how the look and feel match, but there's a sort of visual progression from one product to the next."

Ben suppressed a yawn. It wasn't so much the talk that was making him tired, but the glare coming through the glass.

Boom. Ben jerked in his seat, and Margaret nearly knocked over her water glass. A large, flat hand lay pressed against the outside glass where it had struck. The opposite hand twiddled its fingers in a smarmy wave. The two hands belonged to Sidney Alstead. He walked along the front of the restaurant and came inside.

Margaret glanced at Ben, raising her eyebrows.

"It's okay, a friend of mine," Ben said and immediately regretted it.

Sidney walked up the aisle, shaking his head and motioning for Ben to stay seated. He towered above them. "How are you, Ben?"

"Not unwell. This is Margaret Chase."

"Margaret," said Sidney, nodding curtly. Neither held out a hand.

Ben waited through an awkward silence, then finally asked, "Do you want to sit down? We already ordered."

"Okay," said Sidney, pushing into the booth next to Margaret. "But just for a second. I've got a meeting with Wilson."

"Wilson?" Ben couldn't stop himself. "You're doing some work over there?"

"Well, sure. You knew that."

Ben nodded hastily. "I didn't realize they got you on board so fast."

"Like that," Sidney said, snapping his fingers. "It's almost more than I want at this point." He glanced at the open portfolio. "Your work?" he asked Margaret.

"It is," she said.

Sidney turned down the corners of his mouth, quickly turning through the portfolio's pages. "But you're not designing anymore?" It was more a statement than a question.

"That's true," said Margaret. "I had to give it up. Carpal tunnel. You figured because the products are all old?"

"No." Sidney shook his head. "I figured because the work is crap."

Margaret looked as if she had just been slapped—angry and astonished.

"Christ, Sidney," said Ben, "That's a bit much."

"Hey, no hard feelings." He smiled at Margaret. "It's not personal. You've given it up anyway. I'm just calling it like I see it."

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"Maybe," Ben leaned forward, "you're not seeing too well."

Sidney held his palms up. "I'm not going to argue about it." He slapped the table and slid out of the booth. "I'm sure Ms. Chase has lots of other skill sets to keep her going." He winked openly at Ben. "I'll see you next Friday at the Hamilton Christmas party." As he walked out of the restaurant, waiters had to press themselves against tables to let him pass.

Neither of them said anything for a minute or more. "That's a friend of yours?" Margaret finally asked.

"Not really. Not at all," said Ben. "We just met at one of those Ad Federation meet-and-greet events."

"I didn't know that they made them like that anymore."

"Apparently they do," said Ben.

Margaret zipped up her portfolio and set it next to her in the booth. Ben ate his soup and sandwich when it came, but he hardly tasted the food. Margaret offered small, friendly talk, but Ben found it hard to imagine that she would want to work with him now. He would just remind her of this very unpleasant experience. Ben thought he might not like to work with her either. Did she think that Sidney had taken over his work at Hamilton? It wasn't true. They had a lot of projects and many clients.

Besides, Ben had to admit, there was more than a little truth in what Sidney said, as impolite as he had been. He had to compromise his artistic standards when he worked with Margaret. She always wanted the most pedestrian designs. Ben should've told her long ago that she needed to defer to his judgment on visual matters. If she did want to work with him in the future, he would tell her just that.

When the check came, Ben suggested that they split it down the middle.

When Sidney called on Tuesday afternoon, Ben was mocking up some designs for Margaret Chase after all. The Hamilton project was still in limbo, and he had time on his hands. It went against his grain, but if he completed some initial layouts, she might be willing to forget the whole incident, like the proverbial bad dream.

It was hard though to imagine Sidney as some illusory netherworld figure when his name showed up on the caller ID.

Ben picked up the phone. "Hello, Sidney."

"Got your spy phone working, I see," said Sidney.

"What's up? I've got a rush project."

"I hope not for that bimbo."

"No," Ben lied. "Something else. But that so-called bimbo commands a lot of business in this town. And she knows a lot of people."

"Not an issue for me. Looks like I'll be going in-house at Hamilton. Starting next Monday. Thought I should let you know."

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Ben beat his fist quietly into his thigh. He was glad Sidney wasn't there to see the expression on his face. "That's great. Going in as an associate designer?" He imagined Sidney would at least be stuck with the worst rote production work.

"Come on. Those days are behind me. It's a senior designer position."

Ben couldn't reply, but Sidney was rambling on. "I wasn't sure if I should take it. I like my independence. At least you've got that. But a few good years with Hamilton, and I could start my own agency."

"What would you call it?" Ben whispered.

"I don't know," said Sidney. "I haven't thought about it." He paused for a moment, but couldn't come up with an answer. "Look, once I'm inside, I should be able to throw some work your way."

Ben rolled his lips against his teeth, then managed a simple, "Okay."

"I owe it to you." Sidney laughed offhandedly. "I'm responsible for you since I, you know, saved your life."

"My life?"

"Forget it," said Sidney. "I'd better let you get back to your rush job. See you Friday night at the Walpole." He hung up.

Ben set his phone slowly back in the cradle. For a second, he imagined moving to another city and starting over again. Or starting some other career. One where he'd never cross paths with Sidney Alstead.

His invitation to the Hamilton Group holiday party had never arrived. Ben considered attending under the premise that Sidney had invited him. But Sidney didn't work there yet. He could almost certainly crash, but it would be humiliating if they were checking a guest list or had assigned seating.

On impulse—and against his better judgment—Ben tried Wilson's direct line. He heard Wilson's suave voice on the message. He punched 0 without leaving a message, found the automated directory, and transferred to Cynthia Phillips.

She was decidedly cold when Ben gave his name. "Sidney Alstead's friend?"

"Well, not exactly," said Ben awkwardly.

"You two were together that night at the Shiva."

"We'd just met."

"Right." She clearly didn't believe him.

"Look," Ben said. "I was trying to follow up with Clifton about the Zendo Furnishings project. I'd done some initial concepting—"

She cut him off. "I'm less informed about Cliff's projects than you think. I believe they've moved forward with that one already. Did you leave him a voice mail?"

Ben had left him one late last week, but he had never heard back. "No, I'll do that."

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"I'll transfer you."

"One more—" But she was already gone, and he was back in Wilson's voice mail. He hung up without leaving a message.

She had missed the chance to ask him to stop by the Hamilton Christmas gala.

On Friday night, it began to rain around rush hour. By dinnertime, the rain had begun to freeze. It was a lousy night to stand in a doorway, Ben thought to himself. He ducked into a dingy bar across the street from the Walpole Hotel to warm up.

Under his overcoat he was dressed for the party. He had driven downtown without any clear intentions, let alone a firm plan. He wanted to talk to Wilson. If they weren't going to use his work anymore he wanted to hear Wilson say as much. He'd demand an explanation. He had fantasies of denouncing Sidney in front of his new colleagues. But on what grounds? That Sidney had assaulted some homeless kids? People would want to know why Ben hadn't reported the incident. He couldn't denounce Sidney simply for being large and obnoxious. Maybe beneath his polish, Wilson was simply large and obnoxious, too. Maybe that's how he got ahead.

Ben had parked a few blocks away, but by the time he was across the street from the hotel, he had lost his nerve. He had stepped back into the shadows of an alley and watched hotel and party guests come and go. When he finally slipped into the little bar, more than an hour had passed. He didn't notice that he was shivering until he got inside.

"Yeah?" the bartender asked.

"Brandy," said Ben.

"Any particular kind?"

"No."

He drank a second one, too. The drinks hardly spurred him to action. He figured that he'd better just go home.

Outside, he turned his collar up against the freezing rain. He glanced one last time at the hotel, and there was Wilson coming through the revolving doors, walking fast. He looked twice over his shoulder as he crossed the street. Ben followed him into a narrow side street.

"Wilson, wait up, I've got to talk with you," Ben shouted. He ran and caught the man by the sleeve. Wilson had slowed at the sound of Ben's voice. In the hazy, rain-streaked light, Ben could see an amused look of scorn on Wilson's face. Out of some primordial instinct, Ben turned, imagining Sidney coming to blindside him, but there was no one there.

"What do you want, Ben?"

"You got my voice mail. Why don't you return your calls?"

"I can't return all my calls. Just the important ones." He jerked his elbow and his sleeve snapped out of Ben's hand.

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The wool burned Ben's cold fingertips. He put his head down and rammed with his forearms into Wilson's chest. Wilson slid back awkwardly, then toppled hard when his foot caught in a crack. He was dazed when Ben caught him up by the lapels of his overcoat. Ben squatted for leverage and bounced Wilson's head off the curb again and again and again.

He couldn't remember walking back to his car or even getting in it. He had simply been with Wilson and now he was warming up the engine and rubbing his hands together. What a lousy night. He put the car in gear and drove slowly home.

Ben was dead tired and he slept soundly, like the dead. The phone woke him in the late morning.

"Hello."

"Ben, this is Sidney." It didn't sound like Sidney. His voice was low and guarded, worried even.

"Yeah, Sidney, you woke me," Ben said. He wouldn't put up with the oaf this morning.

"Listen, you've got to do me a favor," Sidney pleaded.

"I thought you were doing favors for me."

"This is different. I'm in jail." He spoke the last words slowly and deliberately.

Ben propped himself up on his elbow. "Yeah, what happened? What for?"

"Wilson got killed, I didn't do it."

"Why'd they arrest you then?"

"I argued with him in a corridor at the hotel, during the Hamilton Christmas party. They were withdrawing their offer. I shoved him a couple of times, but that was it."

Ben could feel his body relaxing, and his life coming into focus again. "How come they withdrew the offer?"

"Who knows? What does it matter? I think that bitch Cynthia Phillips put him up to it. She didn't like me for some reason."

"I can't imagine," said Ben.

"This is no joke. Witnesses saw me bounce Wilson once or twice."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"I can't make a long-distance call from here. I need you to call my mother. She's in Omaha. She'll know what to do."

Ben wrote the number down, promised to call, and hung up. He got out of bed and took a long, hot shower. Afterwards, he cooked a three-egg cheddar omelet, which he washed down with a half pot of coffee. Finally, he called Sidney's mother. It wasn't so hard. She sounded like a small, frail old lady. Ben told her that Sidney was in a lot of trouble. ●

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Hidden Gifts

by Steve Hockensmith

Karen had just spoken blasphemy, plain and simple. Heresy. Sacrilege.

Not that her little brother knew what blasphemy, heresy, or sacrilege were. But he did know poo-poo when he heard it. And to Ronnie, this would be big poo-poo. The biggest.

"That's not true!" he screamed, popping off his pillow and scrambling over the wadded-up macramé blanket that separated his half of the couch from hers. "You're lying!"

Karen didn't even look away from the television.

"Oh, don't be such a baby. Everybody knows it."

And she said it again. The blasphemy. The poo-poo. The innocence-scorching *truth*.

"Santa isn't real."

"No no no no *nooooooooo!*"

Ronnie balled up his fists and pounded at Karen with them. But Ronnie was only six, and small for his age. He might as well have tried beating his sister senseless with a pair of earmuffs.

"Stop it. I can't hear."

Karen swiped out a long, thin arm that swept her brother off the couch. She didn't do it maliciously. It was a casual gesture, like opening a curtain. There were things she wanted to see. Things she wanted to *feel*.

Cousin Rick hadn't been in the apartment when she and Ronnie got home from school. And when their scrawny, thirtyish "cousin" (they refused to call him "Uncle Rick," like Mom wanted) wasn't around to hog the TV and flick lit cigarettes at their heads and hunch over the phone having hissy-whispered conversations with his creepy friends, Karen tried to make the most of it.

Steve Hockensmith tries to contribute a holiday story to each of our January issues and a Sherlock Holmes-themed story to each February issue. The series that began with his first Holmes-themed story has turned into a successs at novel length, with the first book, *Holmes on the Range*, earning Edgar, Dilys, Anthony, and Shamus award nominations. Look for book two, *On the Wrong Track*, in paperback now, and *The Black Dove* (hardcover) in February.

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Today, "the most" meant soaking up Christmas cheer.

It was December 23, 1979, and the afternoon reruns were Christmas episodes. *Andy Griffith, The Beverly Hillbillies,* even *The Addams Family*—they'd all been wrapping presents and drinking eggnog and learning Very Special holiday lessons. It was totally phony and forced, but even bogus Christmas cheer with a laugh track and soap-flake snow was better than no Christmas cheer at all.

Karen and Ronnie didn't even have a tree that year. They'd started to put one up with Mom, pulling out the big fake fir Dad used to call "the holly-jolly green giant." But Cousin Rick put a stop to that.

"Jeez, what are you doin'? A guy can barely turn around in this sardine can, and you're gonna plop that big S.O.B. in the middle of the room? No way. You want a Christmas tree, decorate the bushes in the parking lot. Now shut up, would you? I gotta keep my cool. The Big Call could come any minute, and those guys ain't messin' around."

The kids turned to their mother.

Cousin Rick had been waiting for "The Big Call" for a week, and *something* was always getting on his nerves. When he wasn't out "hustling"—his word for whatever it was he did all day—he paced the apartment like a barnyard rooster, twitchy, herky-jerky, his round, anxious eyes darting from the TV to the phone. He'd already turned off the Christmas carols (he couldn't bear "B.J. and the Bear") and nixed the stringing of lights (the bright colors reminded him of "a bad trip," whatever that meant). Now he wouldn't let them put up a tree?

Surely, Mom would stand up to him this time. Surely, she'd choose their Christmas over her boyfriend's weird little tics. Surely.

Without a word, Mom packed up the tree and stuffed it back in the closet. The next day, Karen saw it poking out of a dumpster around the other side of the building.

Which is how Christmas came to be something *out there*—at school, in stores, on billboards. In the past.

Or on TV.

It was the Bradys' turn now. Little Cindy was asking a department-store Santa to cure her mother's laryngitis so she could sing a solo at their church Christmas service. That's what had brought up the whole Santa Claus thing in the first place.

"Stupid kid," Karen had snorted. And then she'd said *it,* blasphemed—and Ronnie had flipped out.

"There *is* a Santa Claus!" he howled from the floor.

His voice quavered, as if he might cry, but Karen knew it wasn't the tumble off the couch that had hurt him. Their apartment might have been tiny, but the musty, mustard-colored shag covering the floor was as thick and soft as a dirty old sponge.

No, *she'd* hurt him, and she wasn't even sure why. His faith in

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Santa had been irritating her, rubbing on her nerves like sandpaper, for weeks. She was a big kid—almost ten—and she knew she should let Ronnie have his little-kid dreams. Yet another part of her longed to shake him awake.

She kept her eyes on the Bradys.

"Santa's fake," she said.

"He's real!"

"No, he's not."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"But *how* do you know?"

"I just *do.*"

"Prove it!"

Karen finally tore her gaze away from the screen.

"You want me to? *Really?*"

Her brother blinked at her. It was up to him now.

If he insisted on this, she'd have to go through with it, right? That's what big sisters are for—helping little kids learn. And if a lesson stung a little, well, that wouldn't be her fault, would it?

Ronnie nodded reluctantly.

"All right," Karen said.

She walked over to the TV and switched it off. The reruns would come around again one day. That's why they called them "reruns." But this moment with her brother—it would come only once.

"Let's go."

She headed for the bedroom Mom had been sharing with Cousin Rick the past few months. The door was closed. The door was *always* closed.

"Where are you going?"

Karen looked back at her brother. "Where does it look like I'm going?"

"But . . . we can't go in there."

"Why not? Mom's at the Tiger tonight—she won't be home for hours. And you know how it is when *he's* supposed to be watching us. He'll probably show up five minutes before Mom and pretend he was here all day."

"But if he catches us . . . you remember what he said."

Karen did remember—the tone of Rick's voice, anyway. If he ever found them messing with his things, he'd have to do something . . . ugly. Karen had understood that much even if some of the words were new to her.

"He won't catch us," she said. "We'll only be in there a minute."

She turned and opened the bedroom door. The room beyond was messy, dark. *Adult.*

She stepped inside.

The bed—that was the place to start. Karen got down on her hands and knees and pushed away the crumpled clothes and ciga-

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rette packs so she could take a look underneath. The shades were drawn down over the windows, yet just enough silver-gray light glowed around the edges to see by.

There wasn't much to see, though. Just more clutter.

A single shoe. Dad's aluminum softball bat, the one Mom kept around "for protection." An old *People* magazine. A torn wrapper with the word "Trojan" printed on it.

It suddenly occurred to Karen that she might not find what she was looking for. The thought scared her.

"What's down there?"

Karen looked over her shoulder. Her brother stood in the doorway, half in half out of the room.

"Nothing."

She stood and started toward the closet. To reach it, she had to step around a pile of dirty clothes as high as her waist.

The apartment had never been like this when Dad was alive. But after Mom had to start working two jobs—days at the Lawn Devil plant, evenings tending bar at the Toy Tiger Lounge—things changed.

And then Uncle/Cousin Rick showed up, and things didn't just change some more. They fell apart.

He appeared overnight, like Christmas presents or Easter eggs. One morning, Karen and Ronnie stumbled bleary-eyed from the tiny bedroom they shared and *there he was.* A complete stranger eating their Boo Berry at the kitchen table.

"Hey," he'd said through a mouthful of cereal. "Your mom's still asleep."

After another half-hearted bite—and a full minute of awkward silence—Rick dropped his spoon and stood up.

"I don't see how you can eat this crap," he mumbled, and he stomped past the still-gaping kids and disappeared into their mother's bedroom—closing the door behind him.

He'd left the bowl, still filled with milk and soggy blue blobs, sitting on the table. That was The Rick System for dining and dishwashing: Dirty bowls, plates, cups, and silverware were left out, encrusted with food, until there was nothing left to eat with. And when you reached that point, you got all your food from KFC and White Castle and ate it straight out of the box.

Cleaning (never), sleeping (late), bathing (when people noticed the smell)—soon it was all on The Rick System. *Mom* was on The Rick System. And it was making her seem less like Mom every day.

Dad used to warn Karen about "bad influences" at school, but she never really knew what he meant until she saw the effect Cousin Rick had on her mother. If there really were a Santa Claus, she knew what she'd ask him for. Not that the fat man would do it.

Santa gave bad people a lump of coal. He didn't drop them down abandoned mine shafts.

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"What are you looking for?" Ronnie asked as Karen stepped up to the closet Mom and Rick now shared.

"You'll see."

But Karen wasn't sure he would. What if there was nothing *to* see? Could Cousin Rick have changed Mom that much?

She pushed aside one of the closet's sliding doors and got her answer.

"Come here," she said.

She turned to her brother and grinned.

Ronnie moved into the room slowly, cautiously, as if the floor was littered with land mines instead of dirty laundry. But then he saw what had put the smile on his sister's face, and he ran the rest of the way to the closet, plowing through heaps of wrinkled clothes as he went.

"The Death Star! The Death Star! The Death Star!"

Ronnie reached out for the box, ready to tear the heavy cardboard apart with his bare hands to get at the treasure pictured in color on the side: a *Star Wars* Death Star Playset, the very thing he'd asked Santa for in the letter Mom helped him write two weeks before.

Ronnie stopped.

The very thing . . . and here it was in Mom's closet next to a Nerf football and a Shaun Cassidy album and a Nancy Drew book and a bunch of plastic-wrapped socks and underwear.

Two tubes of brightly colored wrapping paper were propped up in the corner.

Karen watched her brother's face as he put it all together. Wonderment gave way to puzzlement gave way to disappointment.

And then finally: contentment.

No, there was no Santa Claus. But yes, there would be a Christmas . . . because their mother still loved them.

Ronnie dropped to his knees before the Death Star, looking as reverent and awestruck as a shepherd in the manger.

"Last year, it was all under the bed." Karen knelt next to her brother and picked up the Shaun Cassidy LP—obviously a gift for her, even though it was Leif Garrett she truly loved. "I found it by accident. Mom was getting rid of Dad's clothes and junk, and I . . . I guess I was looking for something I could keep."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Karen shrugged. "You were too little. And you were still all sad about Dad."

"I'm *still* all sad about Dad."

Ronnie leaned in closer to the Death Star and started picking at the packing tape that sealed it in its box.

"Hey!" his sister barked, making him flinch. "You can't open it, dummy! We're not even supposed to be in here."

"But I wanna play with it," Ronnie whined.

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"You can play with it after Christmas," Karen said, unconsciously imitating the flat tone and clipped diction of an exasperated adult. "And don't forget to look surprised when you unwrap it."

"But—"

"Do you want Rick to know we've been in here?"

"But—"

"Cuz he'll figure it out."

"But—"

"And then he'll do it, I swear. What he said he would."

Ronnie nodded glumly . . . then reached out for the box again.

"But I wanna *play* with it."

Karen sighed. Fear didn't always work with Ronnie, and logic was no help whatsoever. What she needed now was a distraction.

"Hey, you know what?" she said. "I bet there's more presents in here. Maybe even something cooler than your *Star Wars* thing."

Ronnie looked at her sceptically, for what could be cooler than a Death Star Playset? But he said, "Really?"

"Sure." Karen pointed into the darkness that swallowed the rest of the closet. "Back in there. Get out of the way and we can look."

"Well . . ." Ronnie slowly dragged himself away from the toys. "All right."

Karen stood and pulled the sliding doors toward her, revealing the other half of the closet—Cousin Rick's half, to judge by the leisure suits hanging there. Not that Karen had ever seen Rick in a suit. He favored loose, broad-collared polyester shirts and tight white slacks. He used to be some kind of salesman, Mom had explained once, but now he'd "gone freelance," so he could dress however he wanted. Later, the kids asked him what his job was, but he just grinned and said, "Your Uncle Ricky's a desperado." He said it like it was a joke, but Karen and Ronnie didn't get it. When they didn't crack a smile, Rick told them to buzz off and mind their own beeswax.

Karen didn't think there'd be any presents mixed in with *his* stuff. But she made a show of looking anyway, sliding aside suits and digging through the tasseled loafers and stinky sneakers heaped up on the floor. Another minute or so and she'd contrive some reason for them to get out of there. Maybe a false alarm of the "Do you hear footsteps?" variety. Anything to get her brother away from the Death Star before he could open it up—and totally give them away.

"Hey," Ronnie said. "What's that?"

He pointed at a dingy Purdue University sweatshirt at the back of the closet. Unlike the rest of the clothes spread around on the floor, it didn't look like it had been dropped and forgotten the second it was stripped off. It was actually spread out with something resembling care.

Just below the Purdue logo—a barrel-chested, mean-eyed man

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gripping a sledgehammer—the sweatshirt bulged as if straining to cover a big pot belly.

There was something under there. Something hidden in a half-assed way that seemed oh so very Rick.

"Go on," Ronnie said. "*Look.*"

The little man on the sweatshirt glared at Karen hatefully. He had more muscles than Rick, that was for sure, but the look of surly contempt on his cartoon face—that was the same.

It should've served as a warning, a reminder that they hadn't actually "messed with" any of Rick's stuff yet. That it wasn't too late. Karen knew that.

And still she flipped the little man off and whipped the sweatshirt aside.

Underneath was a box with the word "Florsheim" printed on the lid.

"What is it?"

"I think it's just shoes," Karen said.

The disappointment in her own voice surprised her. What had she been hoping to find? A Malibu Barbie? A pony?

It was Christmas, and Rick had bought new shoes . . . for himself. Of course.

Karen lifted off the lid.

"Hey!" Ronnie said, leaning in to peek around her. "He *did* get us something for Christmas!"

There were no shoes in the box. Instead, it held a loafy-looking package about the size and shape of a large fruitcake.

Ronnie poked it with a single finger.

"Kinda squishy," he said. "Cruddy wrapping."

Rather than the usual festive red, green, silver, or gold, the package was swaddled in coarse brown paper that looked suspiciously like a cut-up grocery bag. The jagged edges and clumsily folded flaps were fastened down with long strips of masking tape.

Karen didn't know what was in the package, but she knew enough to be scared.

This was what Rick didn't want them messing with. A squishy secret wrapped in plain brown paper. A grown-up thing, forbidden and frightening.

It was time to go.

Ronnie started picking at the tape on the package.

"Stop it!" Karen snapped. "It's not for us!"

Her brother kept working at one corner with a fingernail. A sliver of tape began to peel off.

"Hey! I said stop it!"

"I'm just gonna peek. Rick'll never notice."

"Yes, he will!"

"No, he won't."

Karen grabbed the package and jerked it out of the box. She

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meant to shove Ronnie away, fix the tape, put things back together again.

But her brother had already worked enough tape loose to pinch it firmly, and when Karen snatched up the package, he held tight.

A long strip ripped off. The package opened.

And then it was snowing.

Fine, white powder filled the air. It seemed to hang there a moment, so thick Karen and Ronnie couldn't even see each other. It drifted down slowly, covering the carpet, the dirty clothes, Karen, Ronnie, everything.

By the time the blizzard was over, Ronnie was crying.

"We're in trouble, aren't we?" he said, tears gumming up in the white dust covering his cheeks. "We're in *so much* trouble."

Karen knew the truth of it. She wasn't sure what the white stuff was—Coke Cane? Heroine? Mary Wanda?—but she'd seen enough *Rockford Files* and *Starsky and Hutch* to know it was something bad people fought over. Killed over.

She and her brother weren't just in trouble. They were in *danger.*

Karen felt her lower lip start to tremble. Moisture pooled in her eyes.

And then someone said, "Don't worry. Everything'll be all right." And Karen was shocked and relieved to realize it had been *her.*

Her knees trembled as she pushed herself to her feet, but she willed them to stop.

She and Ronnie had been looking after themselves for a while now. Washing their own clothes, getting themselves up for school, packing their own lunches. How was this any different? It just made their To Do list a little longer.

Clean up drugs
Fix package
Stay alive

"Don't move," she said, heading for the door. "And don't get any of that white junk in your nose or mouth."

"Where are you going?" Ronnie wailed. "Don't leave me!"

"Geez, don't freak out," Karen said with all the cool, big-sister condescension she could muster. "I know what to do."

Less than a minute later, she was back—with the vacuum cleaner.

After hooking up the long, tube-like sucky thingy, Karen used it on her brother. He whimpered and wriggled as the vacuum snorked the powder from his clothes and hair, but soon he was clean enough to go out to the front window and act as a lookout. The second he saw Cousin Rick's dented-up Dodge Dart pull into the parking lot, he was to run and tell her. At which point, she would . . .

She had no idea. She just had to hope she wouldn't need one.

It took her ten minutes to suck up all the powder. She meant to scoop it out and stuff it back in the package, but one look inside the vacuum bag told her that wouldn't work. The whatever-it-was, once

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pure white, was now mixed together with gray dust bunnies and strands of long black hair.

So Karen went to the kitchen and got out the Bisquick.

As she was pressing down the last strip of tape, Ronnie called out, "He's home! He's home!"

Cousin Rick came through the front door two minutes later. He found Karen and Ronnie on the couch watching *The Brady Bunch.* On the screen, Mrs. Brady was singing "O Come, All Ye Faithful."

Her laryngitis was gone. It was a Christmas miracle.

Rick shrugged off his parka and let it drop to the floor. Then he walked to the TV and changed the channel to *Bowling for Dollars.*

"Go outside and play," he said, plopping down between the kids. "The Big Call might come tonight, and I don't want you two hangin' around gettin' me all jittery."

"But it's cold out," said Karen.

"And dark," said Ronnie.

"So?" Rick threw a glance toward Karen's end of the couch. "Build a bonfire or something, I don't c—. . . What's that?"

"What's what?"

"*That.* Under your eye."

Karen brought her fingers up to her face. There was something dry and chalky caked high on her left cheek.

"Oh . . . that must be flour. We made Christmas cookies at school today."

"Yeah?"

And then Cousin Rick did something he almost never did—he actually looked her in the eye.

"You bring any home?"

Karen shook her head.

"Sorry. We ate 'em all."

Rick turned back to the TV. One of the contestants had just thrown a gutter ball.

"Well, go on, then," he grumbled, pulling out his BIC and a pack of cigarettes. "Get outta here. I got business to take care of."

Karen and Ronnie hopped down from the couch and went to get their coats. They didn't complain this time.

"Karen?" Ronnie said as they roamed aimlessly around the parking lot. "What's gonna happen?"

Karen shrugged. "I don't know."

"You think he'll ever find out what we did?"

Probably. Yes. Sooner or later. That's what Karen assumed.

She looked up. It was a perfectly clear night, and the stars were bright and still. None of them shimmered or twinkled. They just hung there like holes in the big, black blanket smothering the sky.

Once upon a time, when she was a little kid like Ronnie, she used to wish on stars. She believed in Santa Claus, too. Same thing, really. Useless.

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But it couldn't hurt, could it?

She picked a star.

"He won't notice," she said. "Everything's going to be okay"

A door creaked open and slammed shut, and the kids turned to see Rick coming toward them with quick, purposeful strides.

He stopped beside his car.

"Finally got the call—the big one," he said, sounding nervous but excited. "I'll be gone for a while. Tell your mom to wait up for me. She and I are gonna go out and celebrate when I get back."

As he ducked into the Dart, Karen noticed something tucked under his left arm.

The shoebox.

"Bye, Cousin Rick!" Karen called out. "Bye-bye!"

She and Ronnie walked out to the sidewalk to watch him drive away, waving until the taillights shrank to mere pinpricks in the distance, then faded to nothingness altogether.

Poor Mom had a terrible Christmas. Fretting. Pacing. Going downtown to fill out the missing-person report. But Karen knew she'd feel better soon. *Be* better soon. They all would be—Mom and Ronnie and her.

For the first time in a long time, Karen wasn't just hoping for that. She *believed.* ●

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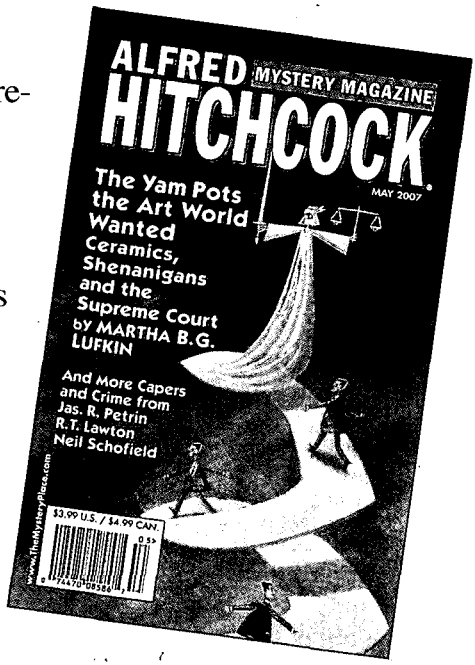

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